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AN ADULT LITERACY PROGRAM

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This paper describes the way in which a program in Adult Literacy has been successful in developing individualized educational programs. The fundamental criterion for this is the identification of the individual needs for each learner, and the development of a teaching-learning program that enables the learner to become self-directing and active in the attainment of literacy skills.

MAJOR PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED BY LEARNING DISABLED ADULTS

There are great demands put on adults in society today. Successful adjustment to an achievement-oriented society is of paramount importance to all adults; for the adult with a learning disability a cycle of disappointment in which unrelenting demands are exerted can lead to failure. The lack of success in turn can create frustration that may result in anxiety and fear. It is not uncommon for employers to demonstrate certain prejudices against learning disabled applicants and employees (Brown, 1979; Siegel, 1974). For example, when employers believe that persons who cannot read seem to be 'misfits', a major obstacle to achieving vocational success has been created.

In determining the category of a person's learning disability many interacting factors may occur and it is an over-simplification to specify one cause.

In the author's experience there are two major categories of students in the Adult Literacy Program at Bald Hills College of T.A.F.E.

- 1) learning disabled,
- 2) educationally disadvantaged.

Educationally disadvantaged students can be identified by one or more of the following criteria:

- a) Prolonged absences from school due to ill health or itinerant families.
- b) Ethnicity - Australian Aborigines and migrant background.

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- c) Environmental deprivation, e.g., under-educated parents often with literacy problems; devaluing of education; lack of resources in the home.
- d) Socio-economic factors, e.g., early withdrawal from school to get a job to contribute to the family income.
- e) Schooling factors, e.g., perception of school as irrelevant; inappropriate teaching methods.

What emerges from the informal interviews and discussions with both groups of students with regard to their previous educational experiences, is the regularity with which fear of failure, anxiety, learned helplessness, discouragement by teachers, poor perception of self-as-learner, aggressive acting out behaviour or, conversely, extreme passivity/withdrawal in educational settings, recur as themes. The following list was compiled from a group of fourteen students currently taking part in a Participation and Equity Literacy Program. The author was acting as a facilitator for the group to negotiate contracts of aims and objectives.

PREVIOUS EDUCATIONAL CONTACT

1. Inequality of educational outcomes.
2. Lack of oral communication.
3. Use of physical violence.
4. Lack of concern for student.
5. Sent to work around the school doing menial tasks.
6. No homework given and no expectations that student would want to do any.
7. Repetition of work, same work over and over again.
8. Discouraged from expecting to do well at school. Total lack of motivation.

An additional factor mentioned was punitive home background, with low parental expectations and child abuse. One teacher reported that several students in the class of six women cried when discussing their school days, their memories were so painful.

An education system which requires failure; which tends to blame students for failure; which concentrates on ranking rather than equalizing educational outcomes; which has low expectations for students labelled as low achievers or learning disabled; provides a legacy of low self esteem for these students.

The major issues that these adult learners face when they return to the education environment are summarized -

- a) School has failed them, so they do not require more of the same situation.
- b) They need to be involved in analysing why the education system failed them, and develop their own strategies for preventing recurrence of failure.
- c) They need to be able to communicate openly and honestly in a non-threatening environment.
- d) They need to re-think the concept of learning and change from a passive learner to an active one.
- e) They need to be able to monitor and assess their own 'success' or 'progress'.
- f) They need to be able to determine what they would like to learn, not what the teacher feels they should learn.

DIAGNOSIS AND PRESCRIPTIVE STRATEGIES THEORETICAL RESEARCH

The fundamental assumption underlying individualized educational programming is to assist students to develop fully their learning capacities. The prerequisite to effective individualized educational programming is accurate identification through thorough assessment of the educational needs of the individual. Norm referenced tests predominate among procedures used to identify students with special educational needs. These, however, are by no means adequate (Boehm, 1973; Okey, 1970; Reynolds and Birch, 1977). Norm-referenced tests may indicate under-achievement but they do not explain it (Meeker, 1969).

The Structure of the Intellect (SOI) Test based on Guildford's (1967) three-dimensional model of the intellect was used in research by Laine and Wong (1982) to identify and specify cognitive discrepancies between successful and unsuccessful secondary students. The test was 90% independent of verbal skills in students (Meeker, 1969) and was not affected by reading proficiency effects. Several studies demonstrated the predictive value of factor scores on SOI tests (Guildford, Hoepfner and Peterson, 1965; Harootunian, 1966; Hoepfner, Guildford & Bradley, 1968; Meeker, 1966; Schmadel, 1960). These studies reported a significant relationship between various SOI tasks and reading, vocabulary and computational achievement for both school-aged students and adults. The results showed no overall difference in scores. However, certain specific intellectual abilities showed a statistically significant difference. These

areas of differentiation were those specifically subsumed in most school work.

The subtest of classification of form was performed relatively poorly by special class students. This ability is one of great importance in concept formation and in 'chunking' bits of information for easier storage in memory (Meeker, 1969), for improved reading and language development (Meeker, 1979) and for problem solving (Guildford, 1979). Meeker (1969, 1979) also showed that a low classification score may indicate that a student can work with one unit or single stimuli but may have a difficult time conceptualizing how things go together. The lack of basic classification skills gives little opportunity to develop the important functions of language, namely, reasoning and information exchange skills. Smith (1975), also points out that the corrective reading approach which uses predominantly phonemic and morphemic drill, does not allow for comprehension as the reading is too slow and focusses on oral correction.

The diagnosis of reading disability (Elkins, 1984) indicates that the major referent has been the 'potential' or 'capacity' of the person to learn to read. Traditionally, this capacity has been estimated by the measure of intelligence. This measure of intelligence, the IQ test, has been used with the Accomplishment Quotient, the A.Q., by educators to raise persons' Reading Age to their Mental Age. Unfortunately, there is a less-than-perfect correlation between reading and intelligence and, more importantly, a single global estimate of intellectual function is unable to provide adequate diagnostic information. The most important aspect of the diagnosis of reading disability concerns its relationship to remedial procedures. Preoccupation with causation is being replaced by a concern for prescriptive diagnosis. Work on language development by Apelt (1965) and Atkinson (1967, 1968) has depended on diagnosis of reading problems, which suggests that certain cognitive skills subserve reading and need to be strengthened. The Laine and Wong (1982) study reinforces this theory.

A review of psychological research on skill learning by Fitts and Posner (1967) led them to conclude that there are three phases of development. The first phase, the 'cognitive phase' in which learners attend closely to the functions and techniques of the various tasks they must undertake to become skilled performers. They try to find out what behaviours are relevant and what are irrelevant for performing the skills. The second phase is the 'mastering phase' in which the skills are practised until mastery is gradually achieved. The third phase is the 'automaticity phase' when the learners practise beyond mastery until they can perform the skill without any conscious concern for it.

Many of the students interviewed admit how difficult it was to attend the interview. Some drove past the college, others went as far as the door and then 'took off'. It is important to realise that they are psychologically 'naked' when they attend interviews and often the interviewer will abandon the informal testing and allow the interviewees to talk about their previous educational contact, their interests or any non-threatening subject that will encourage a positive feeling about re-entering the educational arena.

MOTIVATION

The motivation to re-enter the educational environment may be career oriented or life oriented. There are those who feel inadequacy in literacy skills is affecting their job prospects or their familial or social relations; or those who perceive that inadequacy in literacy skills affects their feelings of self worth. After the students' initial steps to attend a literacy program, it is then important to maintain that motivation.

Thus, the importance of effective motivation in reading achievement should be stressed. Motivation is concerned with arousing interest and maintaining effort. Harris (1953, 1966) suggests there are four main points to consider in helping the learners to change their feelings about reading:

1. The reader should be helped to feel liked, appreciated and understood.
2. Successful experiences are needed to supply the basis for overcoming the negative after effects of frustration and failure.
3. Active effort must be stimulated and sustained by use of intrinsically interesting reading matter.
4. The learners should become involved as fully as possible in the analysis of their reading problem, the planning of their own reading activities and the evaluation of their results.

(Harris, 1953, 1966)

This last point is particularly relevant in adult literacy. By analysing and planning, the students control the learning situation and become responsible for their own learning. They develop internal locus of control. This provides a means of breaking through the cycle of helplessness that has been a trap in the previous learning situation. Plans, aims and goals relevant to the individual can be stated, and meaningful learning can take place. A contract

to plan lessons is one positive step. Osburn (1951) strongly recommended starting the person with some easy-to-learn skill that is respected by others. It makes sense to attack total discouragement first by building success in an area in which good results can be obtained far more quickly than in reading. For this reason, the author has found that a functional task of completing a form in general everyday use, is a very good reinforcer of success, because it provides concrete evidence of achievement.

CONTRACTS *

The importance of establishing a contract with the student is three-fold. It acts as a method of stating the objectives that are to be achieved; allows for the tutor to plan lessons to implement the objectives, and allows for students to monitor their own progress.

Student objectives might be:

To be able to read : newspapers, maps, instructions,
text books, scientific magazines.

To be able to write : letters, orders, delivery notes,
messages, bank forms, general forms.

Tutors' aims might be:

To reduce anxiety.

To bring an exciting and interesting approach to learning.

To make learning a meaningful experience.

To eradicate failure and improve student confidence and increase self-esteem.

ASSESSMENT

Progress in an individualised program is always criterion referenced. The major difficulties experienced in other forms of assessment by the author are:-

- a) Initial testing is often biased by poor performance due to anxiety and unfamiliar environment.
- b) Standardised norm-referenced tests are inappropriate as they are standardised on school children. They give only an estimation of reading age; they do not indicate specific reading problems.

* See Addendum, p.39.

The most important criteria of assessment is the student's perception of 'success' or 'progress'.

The concept of success in adult literacy is best judged by the student. Charnley and Jones (1979, p.175) found the emergent criteria that could be asserted is that

students did not primarily judge their success in terms of utilitarian objectives; they registered a feeling of increased confidence, often described as a feeling of being at ease with themselves.

In the process of achievement, the improvement in skills was often found to be subservient to the development of a positive self image. Research on the relationship between general self-concept and school achievement and between self-concept of academic ability and school achievement was reviewed by West, Fish and Stevens (1985). They found that school achievement was 'causally predominant' over self-concept of academic ability.

CONFIDENCE

Although the notion of confidence is complex, it is the basic constituent of affective personal achievement and, because of its importance, it places affective personal achievement as the prime, yet pervasive objective of a project concerned with ameliorating adult literacy or, indeed, of any project concerned with sub-cultures of the disadvantaged. Charnley & Jones (1979) define confidence as:

- a) an improvement in bearing (physical attribute)
- b) a feeling of ease within oneself
- c) a willingness to reconsider personal attitudes
- d) an ability to assess evidence
- e) a willingness to evangelise
- f) an improvement in self-reliance
- g) an improvement in assurance
- h) a diminution in anxiety

Teacher and tutor observations of students always refer to one or more of these traits. A typical remark at staff meetings might be - "Do you remember...when he first came into classes? Well you should see him now - clean shaven, smart clothes, standing up straight, telling me jokes."

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

To judge the success of the literacy program a survey (see Appendix B) was distributed to the students.

CONCLUSION

The actual number of criteria of success that any students will wish to achieve will depend on their view of what level of self-image enables them to cope to their satisfaction with the majority of practical, emotional and spiritual needs, based entirely on individualistic preferences. Adult education for this group of people may be seen as a healing process, but it cannot promise a cure. The program is not just a matter of skill-training, but of adult education with special reference to literacy.

The major issues for the literacy teacher are:

That initial independent interviews give only a very sketchy view of the student's specific reading difficulties, and assessment procedures in general lack uniformity and are often norm-referenced on an inappropriate population. The specific cognitive discrepancies, especially low classification skills, should be viewed as a causal factor in poor reading performance and the assumption that the removal of a person's 'emotional block' will lead to adequate reading, is an over-simplification of the issue. Specific learning disabilities may still be present and require remedial teaching. The adoption of an ecological approach of consulting the students to ascertain their specific difficulties and the thorough explanation of the methods used to remediate the problem should be used. The use of intrinsic motivation enabling the student to learn more than the mechanics of reading and writing, genuinely produces the desire for further knowledge. Thus, the raising of self-esteem and worth in the successful learning situation can give students the confidence to attempt tasks of a more difficult nature. The criterion of assessment should be the students' perceived achievement of real life goals.

The major issue for the student is the development of confidence and positive self image. The evidence suggests that any attempt to persuade students to meet demands of society as a whole must follow *after* confidence has been established.

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STUDENT SURVEY - APPENDIX B

STUDENT NAME: _____

VERY GOOD	GOOD	FAIR	NEED TO IMPROVE A LITTLE	NEED TO IMPROVE A LOT	Your rating
1	2	3	4	5	

How did I rate myself at the beginning
of this course?

reading	_____
spelling	_____
punctuation	_____
hand writing	_____
free writing	_____
speech - conversation	_____
maths	_____

How do I rate myself now?

reading	_____
spelling	_____
punctuation	_____
hand writing	_____
free writing	_____
speech - conversation	_____
maths	_____

How do you feel about your progress?

How do you feel about yourself now?

Has this course helped you in your
job prospects?

Has this course given you confidence in
your relationship to others?

Has this course helped you in your job
performance?

Have you been able to relate well to your
teacher/tutor?

Has the teacher/tutor explained work clearly?

Has the teacher/tutor been well prepared
for the lessons?

Any other comment regarding the teacher's performance?

What skills do you still need to learn to help you in the future?

Please state any ideas you have that would help us to improve the course.

PARTICIPATION AND EQUITY PROGRAM

ADULT LITERACY - APPENDIX C

C O N T R A C T

The following ideas and suggestions have been compiled by the group and I agree to abide by these.

Timekeeping: To arrive at college by 8.50 for a 9.00 start, to finish at 3.15p.m.

Time Off: If I require time off I need to contact the coordinator as soon as possible and this is my responsibility.

Dress: Smart casual dress at all times.

Coffee Breaks: Flexible and to be negotiated by the students in consultation with the teacher.

Homework: This will be set by the teacher but this is my responsibility to complete it.

Materials: It is my responsibility to arrive at college with the right equipment.

CONTENTS OF THE COURSE

Methods of Teaching - these should be changed if the students feel they are not learning from the method. It should not be the student who is expected to change.

First names are to be used at all times for everyone.

Clear and concise instructions that should be repeated if needed.
Re-explain new work in a different way if necessary.

If work is missed see N.....

If content of work is not interesting this must be changed;
there should be flexibility for change. This should be negotiated
between students and teachers.

Discipline should be the responsibility of yourself, your other
students and the teachers.

I will seek to approach all work and people in a positive way and
try and remove negative attitudes.

EVALUATION

There should be a two way communication between myself and teachers
of how I feel about the course and how I feel I am going.

ADDENDUM

*Using a contract as a teaching technique with adults is
proving very effective in fostering motivation, maintaining interest,
developing student responsibility for goal setting, learning and
assessment, and evaluation of learning. Carol Hall describes the
way in which contracts can be used effectively in adult literacy
programs...Hon. Ed.*

MAKING A CONTRACT BETWEEN STUDENT AND TUTOR

The importance of establishing a contract with your student is
three-fold. It acts as a method of stating the objectives that are
to be achieved; allows for the tutor to plan lessons to implement
the objectives; and allows for the student and tutor to monitor
progress. For example:

Your student's objectives could be:

- To be able to read: newspapers, maps, instructions,
text books, scientific magazines.
- To be able to write: letters, orders, delivery notes,
messages, bank forms, general forms.

Tutor's aims for this student could be:

- To reduce anxiety.
- To bring an exciting and interesting approach to learning.
- To make learning a meaningful experience.
- To eradicate failure and improve student confidence and increase self-esteem.

The learners should become involved as fully as possible in the analysis of their reading problem, the planning of their own reading activities and the evaluation of their results.

This last point is particularly relevant in adult literacy. By analysing and planning, the students control the learning situation and become responsible for their own learning. This provides a means of breaking through the cycle of helplessness that has been a trap in previous learning experiences. The student is now in control of the learning situation. Plans, aims and goals that are relevant to the individual can be stated, and meaningful learning can take place.

The use of a contract to plan lessons is a positive step. Osburn (1951) strongly recommended starting the person with some easy-to-learn skill that is respected by others. It makes sense to attack total discouragement first by building success in an area in which good results can be obtained far more quickly than reading. For this reason a functional task of completing a form in general everyday use is a very good reinforcer of success, because it provides concrete evidence of the achievement.

PROGRESSIVE LESSONS AND ASSESSMENT

During initial lessons emphasis is placed on building up confidence, success, self-esteem and removing the chance of failure. Gribble (1983) writing on the teaching of beginning adult readers, states -

Their approach to literacy programs are tentative. They lack confidence. They tend to under-rate their strengths and abilities and demonstrate deep seated fear that they can't learn to read and write - either because they are too old or too dumb or born that way or too slow to keep up.

CASE HISTORY - Rob

STEP 1 - Contract (see p.).

STEP 2 - Progress Assessment - After several weeks the student and I were able to assess together the progress we had made in meeting that contract

Student's objectives		
WRITE:	bank forms	+
	messages	+
	delivery notes	-
	general forms	0
	letters	0
	orders	-
	book reviews	0
	T.V. reviews	0
READ:	newspapers	0
	maps	0
	instructions	0
	text books	0
	magazines	0

LEGEND -

+ skill has been learnt

- skill has not been learnt

0 practise of skill taking place

Rob's verbal assessment of his literacy skills after six weeks of tutoring were as follows:

- He has been able to read short stories in the *Reader's Digest* series without having to use the audiotape.
- He can complete all his banking forms without assistance.
- He has been able to leave 'memos' for the house painter when he has been at work.
- He has written personal letters to his mother and other family members.

When asked how this made him feel:

*Really good. I don't have to ask people to help me.
It's a really good feeling.*

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