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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted with disadvantaged second-graders to test the value of oral reading of literature for increasing reading achievement, presenting books as a source of pleasure, and strengthening vocabulary by offering wider language models than the disadvantaged child's milieu provides. Teachers in the experimental group read, orally, a story every day to the children, using carefully selected books which allowed for emotional identification with characters and situations. Teachers were also provided with a manual of accompanying activities and story-reading techniques. Two standardized tests were administered to students before and after the experimental period. The results revealed that the improvement of the experimental group (155 students) over the control group (130) was significant in vocabulary, word knowledge, and reading comprehension; marginal in quality of vocabulary; and insignificant in word discrimination. Among the conclusions were that associating language learning with intellectual and emotional experiences strengthens the student's language power, and that reading to socially disadvantaged children helps to overcome their lack of experience with books and increases their perception of meaning and word skills. (MF)

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The Effect of Literature on Vocabulary and Reading Achievement

The existence of large-scale reading retardation that stems from weakness of motivation and lack of readiness, and seems unresponsive to different methods of teaching reading, led to the search for an approach to the problems of poor motivation and inadequate readiness that would stimulate children's desire to achieve competency in reading while strengthening their ability to do so. Literature read aloud was chosen as an appropriate solution to the problem because the children's weakness of motivation and readiness could be attributed to two major factors (1) lack of experience with books as a source of pleasure, and (2) inadequacy of language as a consequence of limitations in variety of experience in a milieu that offers restricted language models. Recognition of the need of young children to be ego involved in their learning led to the selection of stories to be read to them which were conceptually comprehensible yet held possibilities for emotional response at their maturity level. It was expected that positive involvement of a conceptual and emotional nature with the variety of experience and vocabulary that literature offers would lead the children to a realization of the pleasure to be gained from books and an assimilation of much of the vocabulary. Specifically, the objectives of the research were:

1. To increase and strengthen the vocabulary of socially disadvantaged children at the second-grade level as a means of preparing them better for effective experiences in reading.
2. To offer socially disadvantaged children experience with books as a source of pleasure in order to stimulate and deepen their desire to read.
3. Through strengthening verbal readiness and heightening motivation to read, to increase the actual achievement in reading of children of culturally limited backgrounds who tend to fall behind in reading, and therefore in academic achievement.

Procedure

Seven elementary schools in New York City, designated by the Board of Education as Special Service schools because of their academic retardation, low socio-economic population, and high percentage of ethnic and racial minorities, became the setting for this research.

Five hundred eighty second-grade children in 20 classes in 7 schools were tested at the beginning of the research. Of these, 285 yielded post-test data, 130 in the control group, 155 in the experimental group. All children fell into the accepted age for second grade in New York City, with boys and girls about equal in number. Hold-

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overs were eliminated, and there were no known cases of mental retardation in the sample. Group testing for I.Q. was not permitted by the New York City Board of Education at the time of the research, but a broad range of learning response was assured by using homogeneously grouped classes at the top, middle, and bottom of the second grade. These placements were determined a priori by the teachers and school administrators according to levels of reading and reading readiness achieved by the children at the end of first grade.

The populations of all the schools included a range of 30-45 percent Puerto Rican children, 40-55 percent Negro children, and the rest white. The number of non-English speaking children proved to be negligible.

The experimental variable, story-reading, was introduced and maintained by the teachers of the experimental classes, all of whom were regularly licensed teachers of the New York City Board of Education and who had been evaluated by their principals as of average competency. Each teacher had had at least one year of teaching experience before the research began. All classes were using a basal series approach to reading, and were following the prescribed curriculum for second grade in New York City Schools.

Experimental and control classes were established in separate schools to avoid contamination as a result of the realistic probability that teachers on the same grade level in a school were likely to share experiences, and the experimental variable of story reading was too easy to imitate.

Materials and Methods for the Special Program

Fifty books for the teachers to read to the children were placed in each experimental classroom, some on open shelves, others in the closet until read.* Book selection followed validation by four judges of the following criteria:

(a) Events, concepts, and relationships must be within the scope of young children's conceptual grasp. The stories shall deal with the universal in childhood experience regardless of class and ethnic variation. Stories shall be of the here-and-now, realistic type, but not primarily informational in intent, nor necessarily familiar in detail. Language, plot, character must enhance a story that is pleasurable and interesting to a young child of about seven. Since the children of this study were assumed to be linguistically unsophisticated and limited in general range of experience, books were geared to a somewhat younger level of maturity than might be selected for middle class seven year olds. This meant that while the basic plot would interest all seven year olds, degree of complexity and length of story were more suitable to younger children.

(b) The stories must allow for emotional identification with characters, aspirations, fears, mishaps or other feelings and adventures within the range of childhood experience, such as occur regardless of class, and to an extent regardless of cultural specificity.

(c) The stories shall be written in language which flows naturally and best conveys the precise idea or colorful image to the juvenile listener. Language shall not be confined to a single grammatical structure nor a fixed sentence length. Sentence length and complexity need to be intrinsically related to the theme and character of the story,

*The list of books may be obtained from the author upon request.

but not of such length and complexity that a young child cannot follow the development of the thought from the beginning to the end of the sentence. There shall be no limitations on vocabulary, either of type of word or number of syllables. All vocabulary likely to be unfamiliar to the children shall be so used in the story that meaning can be readily inferred from the context, illustrations, or explanation by the teacher. Language shall deal with the concrete and sensory, rather than with abstractions or difficult time-space relationships.

Three of the judges were asked to indicate by the number 1, 2 or 3 the level of difficulty of each book according to length, complexity of plot and language. The final 50 books given to the teachers were categorized in these sub-groups of difficulty, and each book so labelled for the teacher's information.

A Manual of Accompanying Activities and story-reading techniques was given to each experimental teacher. Discussion, dramatization, additional reading on the theme, illustrative material other than what is in the book, children's own illustrations, explanation by the teacher of words and references, follow-up activities appropriate to the story such as a trip, construction, letter-writing, crafts or whatever else lends itself to enhancement of comprehension, were among the suggestions offered to insure a variety of approaches to strengthening comprehension of the story and individual words.

Teachers were asked to read a story every day of the school year from the books given to them by the investigator. They were urged to read the stories with attention to phrasing, dramatic quality in the voice, pace, and knowledge of the story before reading. They were also asked to choose a suitable follow-up activity from the types suggested in the manual, and to introduce books in the order of increasing difficulty, as indicated by the number 1, 2, 3 next to each title. Once introduced, a book could be read as often as the teacher or the class desired.

Teachers in the control group proceeded as usual, with stories an occasional treat, if read at all, and not chosen according to the specific criteria indicated for the experimental group.

Administration and Scoring of Tests

1. Form B of the Metropolitan Reading Achievement Test, Upper Primary was administered in October and Form C in June of the school year. Separate scores for Word Knowledge, Word Discrimination, and Reading Comprehension were entered for each child.
2. A Free Association Vocabulary test, validated by Tinker, Hacker and Wesley as a measurement of specific vocabulary knowledge, was given to all children in October and again in June of the research year. Before the test was given, each classroom was carefully prepared to avoid copying of words from blackboard, wall charts, books, *etc.* Coded, lined booklets with each child's name, school, and class on the cover were distributed to the children and identical instructions given to all classes for writing as many words as they could remember in 20 minutes, without regard to spelling.

Quantitative Count

Words were counted according to the following criteria:

(1) Every legible word was counted without regard to its spelling, except proper names of people, made-up words, and words representing sounds. Names of

places, days of the week or months, numerals and contractions were considered important word learnings at this age and for this population, and were counted.

(2) All forms of a verb were considered as separate words rather than as one root word. Tenses may be considered important word learnings at this age and for this population.

(3) Inflections represent a maturing level of development in speech, so plurals formed by simple "s" (houses) as well as plurals formed by change of word (mice) were counted separately.

(4) Comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs were counted separately.

(5) All derived forms of a word were counted separately rather than as derived forms of one root word.

(6) Any word appearing more than once on a given child's paper was counted only once in the total count of that paper.

In view of the discrepancies in handwriting and spelling of children so young, the count was checked by a jury of three college students both as to number of words and agreement on meaning of ambiguous words. The total number of different words for each child was recorded and used to make a master list of the number of different words for each class. Lists of the total number of different words for the experimental and control groups were compiled from the pre- and post-test results of the Free Association Vocabulary Test.

Qualitative Count

The pre- and post-experimental and control word lists were submitted to comparison with Rinsland's frequency ratings of words used by children in free composition. The more rarely the word was used, the higher was its quality rating. Rinsland's frequency ratings, listed in groups of half thousands, were converted into point values in a pre-determined formula according to the index symbol listed for the frequency grouping of the word in the column for second grade: If a word did not appear in the second-grade column it was given the converted value for the group frequency at the next higher grade in which it appeared. If the word appeared in several higher grades, the first appearance was counted. Frequency groupings below the first thousand were not given quality point value because the words are too commonly used to indicate a qualitative differentiation.

Converted quality points were totalled for each child and entered on the prepared space in the booklet and on the master sheets.

Five scores for each of 285 children, 155 experimental, 130 control, were submitted to statistical treatment. The five scores were *Word Knowledge, Word Discrimination,* and *Reading Comprehension* from the Metropolitan Reading Achievement Test, Upper Primary; and *Vocabulary, Numerical Count,* and *Vocabulary, Qualitative Count* from the Free Association Vocabulary Test. An analysis of covariance was made, using the pre-test scores as covariate.

Results

The following is a summary of the results obtained by an analysis of covariance.

1. The experimental group showed an increase in vocabulary over the control group, significant at .005.
2. The experimental group showed an increase in Word Knowledge (Metropolitan Reading Achievement Test) over the control group, significant at .005.
3. The experimental group showed an increase in Reading Comprehension

(Metropolitan Reading Achievement Test) over the control group, significant at .01.

4. The experimental group showed a numerical superiority in quality of vocabulary over the control, with an F ratio of 3.45. Since an F of 3.84 is necessary for significance at the .05 level, significance at the .05 level was narrowly missed.
5. There was no significant difference in Word Discrimination (Metropolitan Reading Achievement Test).

Although the above results apply to the entire group, an examination of the achievement of the three lowest classes in the experimental and control groups is of special importance, inasmuch as these lowest classes have been the most difficult to affect academically.

Six Lowest Classes Considered Separately

1. The experimental group showed an increase in Word Knowledge (Metropolitan Reading Achievement Test) over the control group, significant at .05.
2. The experimental group showed an increase over the control group in quality of vocabulary as measured by frequency rating in the Rinsland Vocabulary List, significant at .05.
3. The experimental group showed an increase in Reading Comprehension (Metropolitan Reading Achievement Test) over the control group, significant at .005 and showing a reversal of a clear trend toward regression among the controls.

Conclusions and Implications

1. The importance of reading to children as a precursor to success in learning to read has been shown to be vital in the case of socially disadvantaged children who do not have experiences with books at home.
2. Ego-involvement and comprehension of concepts are important criteria in the selection of stories to read to disadvantaged children. The role of these factors in stimulating motivation to read while at the same time strengthening language power seems to be an indispensable one in the school learning of the slowest non-readers in the early primary grades.
3. Individual differences play a major role in learning style and aptitude at the same age and within the same socio-economic class. The data suggest that among children of the same age and low socio-economic class, language ability exists along a continuum at one end of which is inadequate comprehension of the spoken word and limited concentration in listening. The continuum proceeds through stages of oral usage of differing complexity and ends at ability to handle the symbols of reading and writing at differing levels of facility. While comprehension, oral language, and the use of written symbols may and do occur in the same child at the same time, the levels of competency vary considerably across the age group in an overlapping pattern of increasing skill.
4. Continued exposure in early childhood to stories read aloud apparently affects basic, beginning stages of the transition that must take place in growth from comprehension of oral language to the final use of symbols in reading. The effect seems related to the stage along the continuum at which the child is functioning at the time of exposure.
5. The slower the children are in academic progress, the more difficult it is for them to deal with words in isolation, unrelated to a totally meaningful experience. Vocabulary thus appears to be learned best by young children in a context of emotional and intellectual meaning.

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6. Socially disadvantaged children come to school with a paucity of the kinds of words more likely to be found in books than in daily speech at home. They need continuous clarification of the words they hear in story books, even when these are suited as a whole to their level of maturity.
7. Levels of competency in comprehension, oral language, and reading are interrelated, but facility in the last, *i.e.*, the use of symbols, seems to be dependent on facility in the first two, *i.e.*, oral language and comprehension. This would imply that comprehension of meaning is basic to growth in the language arts.
8. Continued and regular listening to story books chosen for their emotional appeal and ease of conceptualization seems to aid facility in listening, attention span, narrative sense, recall of stretches of verbalization, and the recognition of newly learned words as they appear in other contexts.
9. The relationship believed to exist between oral language and reading has been confirmed. At the same time, it has been shown that primary grade children retarded in reading strengthen their language power when language learning is incidentally associated with experiences of intellectual and emotional meaning for the age and stage of development of the child.