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ABSTRACT

A method of reading instruction is discussed in this paper. By helping the child to develop mental pictures of what he reads he can better retain the meaning of the sentence as he deciphers the more difficult words. The non-reader can lose the essence of a sentence because he may become too involved in decoding the sentence. A procedure on how to assist children in developing mental pictures is suggested and could be adapted for various grade levels. The use of mental picture could be used in all subject areas once the children have become accustomed to making them. (WR)

TEACHING MENTAL PICTURES: A PROPOSAL AIMED AT MAKING READING MORE MEANINGFUL

by Rosetta Beutler

"I love to read! I see such beautiful pictures and learn about so many interesting things!"

How wonderful! The individual who made those comments was truly reading. Reading does help one enjoy many experiences he could never be a part of otherwise. Readers spend many hours of leisure time enjoying reading while at the same time they are also becoming informed on many and varied subjects. With the outlook in the near future for more and more hours of leisure time to be considered, it is advisable or perhaps even vital that a taste for reading and a thorough enjoyment of reading be developed so that reading can become a profitable pastime.

Great for the reader! But what about the non-reader or the "fluent" oral reader who grasps nothing of what the words mean?

When an author puts words down on paper, he has thoughts to convey and pictures in mind that he wishes to share with the reader. It has been said that words do not bring meaning to the reader but rather that the reader brings meaning to the words. This is to say that the reader must take those impersonal black symbols set down by the author, translate them into words, interpret their meanings, reassemble them into a sentence, and make the corresponding mental images suggested by them. <u>This is reading.</u> For the non-reader this is all too often a tortuous process. However, usually this need not be so. The difficulty lies in the fact that the non-reader tries to perform the task in the order herein set down. He tries to translate the symbols into words, interpret them, reassemble them into a thought, and perhaps he will get to the mental image reproduction part of the process but more often, he has lost the first of

the sentence long before the last of the symbols have reached the translatory step. To illustrate--suppose the sentence the non-reader encounters is THE LITTLE RED WAGON WAS BEING PUSHED OFF THE ROAD. The non-reader probably has no difficulty with the first five words so he haltingly reads THE LITTLE RED WAGON WAS --now he has a little difficulty with the word BEING. He backs up in his thought processes to recall his phonetic training and applies the act of syllabication to the word. He sees that the first syllable is BE followed by the ING. He reassembles the word and comes up with BEING. Now using the sound of the first letter of the word PUSHED together with the word BEING, he guesses that the action is BEING PUSHED. Very likely he also takes a bit of time determining if the next word is OF or OFF. After he looks at the rest of the sentence he may try both and say OF THE ROAD and OFF THE ROAD. By now he surely has lost the essence of the sentence, if indeed he hasn't given up on the whole idea of continuing to "read" the story.

At this point, suppose that he has been trained to make pictures in his mind as he reads. Even though he is a halting reader, he reads THE LITTLE RED WAGON WAS -- Only a short reflection on the words he has read brings to mind the picture of the little red wagon. However crude that picture may be, he has seen in his mind's eye a picture. That picture makes an impression on his memory. As he struggles through the phonetic and syllabication processes to decipher the word BEING and to get from the context the word PUSHED, his memory vision retains the picture of the little red wagon. Now the motion of WAS BEING PUSHED gives action to the little red wagon so that he now has a motion picture taking place in his mental vision. He still has the problem of deciding on the OF or Off to go with THE ROAD. Even though he does take some time with his trial-and-error method of deciding if it says OF or

OFF the road, he has retention of the first part of the sentence via his mental picture. After he does decide what the rest of the sentence says, he incorporates OFF THE ROAD with the picture that his memory is holding in store for him. Now he has completed the whole process. He does not give up nor is he frustrated this time because his efforts have been fruitful--he has an action picture in his mind. Being thus rewarded, he will continue striving even though the translation of the written symbols is probably no less difficult. He continues because he has been rewarded with success. Success begets success. He is eager to continue. Success provides its own motivation. His mental picture shows him the little red wagon being pushed off the road. His mind surveys possibilities--will it be upset as it goes into the ditch? will it perhaps spill everything? maybe it will be broken. Eagerly he tests the next sentence to see which of his pictures the story chooses to show. He has little difficulty with the words TIPPED and DITCH because his mind has anticipated what will happen. He will test the exact words using the sounds of the first part of the words to help him fit the words into the anticipated picture. With more confidence born of his prepicturing, he reads BEFORE TOM COULD STOP IT, THE WAGON TIPPED OVER INTO THE DITCH AND MARY AND ALICE TUMBLED INTO THE GRASS.

With his mental pictures feeding him, he postulated what happened next and found that he had much less difficulty fitting the story into the possibilities he had anticipated. This is not to say that he will know the full story before he reads it. However, when he learns to make the mental pictures, his mind will surely speculate the next events and even though he finds the story to differ from his idea of what may happen, he will find reading less burdensome since he has an interest in what is happening or may happen based on the mental pictures he is creating. These images act as a continuum which carry him forward into what happens next. They help him relate to the story

personally. The story becomes his or a part of him because parts of it fit into the events which he thinks may happen next and which he has already ventured into via the pictures he creates in anticipation.

Another idealistic supposition impossible to achieve!?? If you have read this far, don't cast this aside without "hearing out" the proposition. The idea of teaching children to make mental pictures is not an impossibility. It can be accomplished.

When and how can it be done?

If the foundation has never been laid, it is foolish to attempt to build the upper floors. Far too often teachers have been trying to build the upper levels of reading ability before the foundation has been laid. Few educators will disagree with the idea that the purpose of reading is to get information or to be presented ideas. Again few of those same educators would disagree with the old cliche that "one picture is worth a thousand words." Yet only a few make any attempt to incorporate the idea of pictures with reading beyond a few illustrations in the reader. At the primary level every happening may be illustrated but a survey of a reader even on the second grade level will show a far greater proportion of printed scenes in relation to the number of pictures presented. Granted that every sentence cannot be illustrated. Nor is this a proposal that this should be done even though it were possible to do so without becoming boresome. The proposal herein being made has far greater impact on the individual than to spoon feed him with ready made illustrations for every sentence found in print.

This is a proposal to teach the individual how to produce his own illustrations or images of every event and scene presented to him on the printed page. This is basic to all reading until the reader progresses to the level of abstract thinking. Even then concrete models are often used to illustrate abstract ideas, e.g., a model of an organizational hierarchy or a model of an

atom or of genetic distribution.

Since a foundation is the basis upon which any enduring structure is built, this is a proposal to build the reading foundation before the structure of reading abilities comes into being--to begin at the bottom and build upward.

Frostig and others who have made studies into child growth and development have found that the development of visual perception takes place in a child between the ages of three and one-half and seven and one-half.[1] This tends to indicate that the ability to produce mental pictures should be developed while the child is yet in the primary grades. Granted that in some children the ability to transpose word pictures into mental pictures is a natural process which takes place as a matter of maturation, can it be left to happenstance? Or for that matter, can it be presupposed that it ever happens in the process of maturation? Perhaps, it is always a learned process. Be that as it may, children can be taught to make mental pictures. This is a proposal that such teachings should be begun at the kindergarten level and be further developed at least throughout all the primary grades.

How can this be done? To undertake to develop the ability to make mental pictures in her group, one kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Louise Nealis,[2] began a discussion among her students about Mother. She encouraged them to tell some of the things their mothers do for them. After letting the discussion progress to the stage at which all or nearly all the children were participating, she asked them to cover their eyes with their hands. When each child had covered his eyes she asked the children to make pictures of their mothers in their minds. To help them develop their mental pictures, she asked

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[1] Frostig, Marianne, and David Horn. The Frostig Program for the Development of Visual Perception. Chicago: Follett Publishing Co., 1969.

[2] Mrs. Louise Nealis, kindergarten teacher at Gettysburg, South Dakota.

them such questions as—what is she wearing? Does she have her hair up? Is she ironing, cooking, or cleaning? What color clothes is she wearing? During this time the children were to be thinking without talking to each other.

Following the exercise, Mrs. Nealis had the children draw pictures of their mothers at their work. She reported that the pictures the children drew after such an exercise showed a greater diversity of activities. That is, there were not ten or twelve of the pictures showing the same thing as had been true of former drawing periods. The children then seemed to have something definite in mind. The drawings reflected more individuality since they began their drawings before being distracted by what others were drawing which previously had resulted in a greater propensity to copying rather than making original drawings. Mrs. Nealis further reports that one reticent student who had up till then refused to draw anything now was able to put a drawing down on his paper. She states also that the preparation by way of mental pictures seemed most beneficial to the students who could be said to be the slower thinkers.

Mrs. Nealis and her students enjoyed continued success in their unit on family life in which the children pictured activities of different members of the family. They were also able to apply the mental picturing process to other areas of interest such as their pets, their homes, and their favorites. No follow-up studies have been made to date to see if the mental picture making process carried over into their reading development.[3]

This author reports having had success in the use of the mental picturing process in the upper elementary grades by having the pupils turn on their MV's or mental visions to assist them in following descriptions of action in reading and other language arts. The use of mental pictures has also been helpful in the

[3]Mrs. Nealis' kindergarten class will be entering first grade in September 1972. Hence no follow-up has been possible at this time.

area of developing creativity in writing. One example of this is the silly-sargasalope-exercise. After the students make mind pictures of a creature that could be entitled the silly sargasalope and create some activities for him, they write original stories about him and his activities.

Teachers can use several sessions of the type activities used by Mrs. Nealis until the children seem to be able to picture anything of interest common in their lives. She can further help them to develop mental pictures by reading an interesting sentence from a story and having them visualize it as before. This type of exercise should be continued throughout the children's primary career. When the children have become accustomed to making their mental pictures, they can practice making their mental pictures with their eyes open. Teachers can use ingenuity in making the practice more enjoyable for the children such as telling them to turn on their TV's as the author has. Unconsciously, someone will ask what is that. The teacher can remind them that they all know what a TV is and that an IV is that part of their minds on which they see their mind pictures. The children will enjoy using their IV's if the teacher encourages the habit.

All this is fine for the kindergarten teachers but I teach third or fifth or remedial reading. How is this going to help my little Johnny? He can't go back to kindergarten for this training--that would further deflate his already badly scarred personal image. Here he is--trying to climb the stairs from the first level of reading ability to the second and is having tough going.

Then YOU go back and help him set his first level and/or second level straight by bolstering up his foundation so his reading levels sit solidly on the mental picture foundation. You can use the same methods as that used by Mrs. Nealis. You will need to adapt it to the interest level and cognitive level of your student. He may react in different ways to your suggestions but you can rely on your creativity to "tailor make" the experience to fit his individ-

uality. You probably will find hi[illegible] more susceptible to your su[illegible]gestion that he has an i V and that he should turn on his i V t[illegible] see the picture(s) that the aut[illegible]or is hopin[illegible] to share. With hi[illegible], you may find even greater i[illegible]ediate rewards in strengthening his ability to suggest further action in the story by having hi[illegible] close his book a few [illegible]oments to consider what might happen next. This will help hi[illegible] t[illegible] progress his rea[illegible]ing process. If he perhaps pictures an actio[illegible]n which is in a[illegible]greement with the author, he is doubly rewarded--he is successful in anticipating the next action of the story and also in reading the words via his mental picture "phraseology" that helps hi[illegible] to interpret the words that do follow. Suppose he is in error in the mental picture he has projected. He need not be disappointed since he is then presented with a fresh new look (mental picture and all) of the sequential event that the author does share. This adds momentum which begets more momentum or motivation for hi[illegible] to continue his mental picture speculation.

All this--without any expenditures of extra money, no new material to become acquainted with and no extra materials to be carted around!

The use of mental pictures should be encoura[illegible]ed in all subjects once the children are accustomed to making them. This should greatly enhance their recall of the things studied in social studies, science, and other subject areas. Mental picture making could also become a very effective tool in artihmetic work --an invaluable aid in working stor[illegible] problems especially as a child advances into upper grades. If he has the habit of making mental pictures of his story problems, imagine hi[illegible] working an example such as --a farmer has 235 hens. On Monday he collects 165 eggs, 148 on Tuesday, and 153 on Wednesday. How many eggs did he get in all?-- After he has pictured the group of hens and a container of eg[illegible]s for each of the days, he could hardly make the mistake of adding the four

numbers that appear in the problem for his pictures show him that the one number is emblazoned across the group of hens and will not be confused with the numbers seen on the egg containers. This, of course, presupposes that the child has been taught this as a method of handling numbers too large to visualize as separate items such as five or six may be pictured.

To go back to the little red wagon story. Children can quite readily be taught to build extensions on the pictures the story presents much as those projected in the little red wagon tale. Many children have a natural bent for day dreaming as it is and the teacher need only channel that inclination into workable situations as have been suggested here.

Teachers with ingenuity and any degree of creativity can enlarge on the ideas given here and adapt them to the group and/or individuals she is working with and help them create a whole new world of reading action including the pictures on their own personal TV's.

This is the challenge of this proposal.