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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a series of practical suggestions for remedial reading teachers, particularly those who are newly appointed or who have been assigned to a new school setting. The suggestions are organized into five main sections: structuring the job, planning for efficient use of the remedial teacher's time, developing relationships with pupils, planning for effective learning, and meeting demands for accountability. (AA)

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PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS FOR REMEDIAL TEACHERS

International Reading Association Convention
Miami Beach, Florida, Thursday, May 5, 1977, 9:00-10:00 A.M.
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This paper will discuss five main concerns of remedial reading teachers: how to structure the job, how to plan for efficient use of time, how to develop the right kind of relationship with pupils, how to plan for effective learning, and how to meet the demand for accountability.

Structuring the Job

For the newly appointed remedial reading teacher, or for the experienced remedial teacher assigned to a new school setting, the first step is to find out what policies have been established. These policies may include such important items as the objectives set for the remedial program, pupil selection procedures, scheduling, the size of remedial groups, the length of time a child may be kept in the program, and so forth. It is important in a new situation to adhere to the policies that have been set, and to wait until one is fairly securely established in the position before working for policy changes.

Closely related to the policies issue is the need for a clear understanding of lines of authority. In different situations the nominal supervisor may be the principal or assistant principal, a district reading consultant or supervisor, a director of pupil personnel services, or a director of special education. As Humphrey⁽¹⁹⁷¹⁾ has pointed out, the school principal is usually the effective supervisor, whose approval and support is essential. Hopefully there will be no clashes among the authorities with whom the remedial teacher has to deal. If there are, the remedial teacher needs to use every bit of tact to avoid taking sides, or being caught in the middle.

It is also important to find out how specific the set policies are, how the supervisor envisions the job, and how open to change these ideas are. The history of special reading services in the district and in this particular school can reveal how present policies became established.

Other important questions include the following: What are the characteristics of the school population? What selection and evaluation

procedures have been used? What pupil records are available? What use has been made, if any, of volunteers in the remedial program? How have they been recruited, trained, and supervised?

Making an Inventory of Materials, Supplies, and Equipment. Of course one of the first requirements is to find out what there is to work with, not only in the reading room, but also elsewhere in the school. Closets may be filled with discarded sets of readers and other books which, being unfamiliar to the children, may be quite useful. Idle equipment may include slide and filmstrip projectors and audio equipment that can be put to good use. A simple coding scheme can be devised which will indicate the difficulty level of an item, the specific skills it seeks to develop, and whether it is for use with teacher direction or can be used independently. A separate symbol can identify game-like practice materials.

Using a Preparatory Period. When teacher and program are continuing, only a short period of a week may be needed to get organized, while for a new teacher, a preparatory period of a minimum of two weeks is desirable. The first priority is pupil selection and classification. Even if this was done during the preceding instructional term or semester, vacancies may have occurred which should be filled. This probably will involve study of pupil records, some diagnostic testing, and conferring with teachers and parents. Record folders have to be set up for newly admitted pupils, and records of continuing pupils need to be reviewed and brought up to date. Tentative groups are to be set up, and plans for some of the continuing pupils may be revised.

The second main activity of a preparatory period is physical arrangement of the reading center. Instructional materials need to be arranged for easy access and convenient use. A moderate amount of room decoration is desirable. Space needs to be arranged for group and individual activities, a listening center, a visual aids center, and a comfortable browsing area. Volunteer helpers can be quite useful in this aspect of the preparatory period.

Planning for Efficient Use of the Remedial Teacher's Time

Instructional Blocks. Many remedial teachers have found it useful to divide the school year into four blocks or terms of approximately equal duration. In a typical school year of 190 days or 38 weeks there can be four teaching blocks or terms of 8 weeks each, with one non-teaching week for preparation, testing, and conferring before each block and two non-teaching weeks at the end of the year. Alternatively there can be two preparatory weeks at the beginning and one week at the end. It is also possible to have 5 or 6 instructional blocks of shorter duration, but that may involve too many interruptions for maximum efficiency.

The Remedial Teacher's Schedule. The duration of remedial periods usually ranges from 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the school situation. When there are self-contained classrooms shorter periods can be used for younger children and somewhat longer periods for older children. In departmentalized situations the school-wide period marked by bells should apply. The usual result will provide the remedial teacher with 5 teaching periods a day, plus a lunch period and a non-teaching period, usually the last one, for correction of tests and exercises, record keeping, instructional planning, and conferences. Often the completion of the jobs for the non-teaching period will keep the remedial teacher busy until well after school.

Five teaching periods a day or 25 periods a week can best be utilized by having some groups twice a week and other groups three times a week. There does not seem to be any dependable evidence that more than three remedial periods a week produces faster learning than three periods. Having five groups on three days and another five groups on the intervening three days is possible whether the teacher is located in one school or divides time between two schools. The scheduling of the children should be cleared with classroom teachers to try to insure that no child will miss too much of another important subject. Sometimes neatness of scheduling has to be sacrificed in order to minimize the inroads into the children's other school work.

Experience has shown that highly individualized remedial teaching becomes increasingly difficult as the size of the group is increased. For the most severe disabilities it may be necessary to give completely individual help for a time, then move the child into a group of two, and later on into a larger group. Groups of five or six are probably the maximum that allow truly individual attention. Larger groups of up to 15 children are sometimes imposed on remedial teachers, but that should be conceptualized as corrective teaching rather than remedial teaching. The total case load of a remedial reading teacher should vary between 35 and 50 children at any one time.

Multiplying the Remedial Teacher's Hands. Obviously a remedial teacher can provide more individual help with a group of assistants than single-handed. During the past decade the idea of using volunteers in tutoring programs grew with great rapidity. Nobody knows how many school systems are using volunteers as tutors or how many volunteers are at work. Tutors can be of many kinds: high school students tutoring elementary school children; upper grade children tutoring children in lower grades in the same school; students in teacher education programs; mothers tutoring other mothers' children; housewives with time to spare; and senior citizens, a great potential resource that has not yet been tapped in many communities.

In 1971 Criscuolo described five kinds of tutoring projects that were operating simultaneously in one middle-sized city. He also pointed out five areas of possible difficulty. The first is training; a workshop with a minimum of five sessions is needed. The second is materials; the remedial teacher and classroom teacher are responsible for providing these, but sometimes supplies are short. The third is attitude; with all good intentions, volunteers sometimes antagonize the children to whom they are assigned by patronizing or critical remarks or by attitudes expressed non-verbally. The fourth is articulation with what the classroom teacher is doing; this is always a problem for remedial teachers as well as for volunteers. And finally, there is need for on-going supervision and for conferences between the remedial teacher and the volunteers.

In middle schools and secondary schools in which the service squad idea is well established, a corps of student aides can do a variety of helpful things such as take attendance, help children to find materials and put them away properly, assist children with problems, teach or supervise games, use answer keys to check exercises, and help with housekeeping (Crawford and Conley, 1971). The effectiveness of any program utilizing volunteers depends mainly on the training and supervision provided. With effective use of volunteers, the amount of really individualized help that can be provided by one remedial teacher can be greatly amplified.

Developing Relationships with Pupils

What kind of person does a successful remedial reading teacher have to be? One writer lists the needed qualities as "enthusiastic, patient, optimistic, sensitive, positive, organized, dedicated, confident, intelligent, and knowledgeable." (Humphrey, 1971) It is significant that personality characteristics were listed first and cognitive abilities were mentioned last. Actually many different kinds of people have been successful as remedial teachers, and one does not have to be strong in every theoretically desirable characteristic to do good work.

Many years ago I described the essential characteristic of the good remedial teacher as follows:

The teacher who succeeds with poor readers must be able to convey to them the feeling that they are liked, appreciated, and understood. Each teacher must do this in ways harmonious with his own personality. A quiet teacher who creates a calm, relaxed atmosphere, a vivacious teacher who stirs children up, and a strong teacher whose self-confidence conveys a feeling of security to children, may each get fine results although their ways are different. Children know when they are liked, and also have a keen sense for hypocrisy. The teacher who does not like a child usually cannot help him. (Harris, 1956, 281)

Some children, already burned by their previous classroom experiences, enter a remedial reading room with guarded suspicion. Their behavior seems to say, "You can't make me read." The experienced reading teacher

accepts this attitude about as follows. "I'm here to help children with reading. If you don't feel like being helped, I'll spend my time with the children who do want help." After a few sessions in the room, killing time and watching what the teacher is doing with the other children, the resistant one usually begins to join in.

Psychotherapists talk about the importance of rapport, which means a relationship of mutual trust or emotional affinity, as being essential in a helping relationship. When there is rapport the child feels accepted, appreciated, and understood. He is not afraid that he will be scolded, ridiculed, or punished. He senses that the teacher has his welfare at heart and can be trusted. Developing this kind of relationship with the children should be one of the main objectives of the remedial teacher.

Application of Behavior Modification Techniques. What we now call behavior modification, we used to call employing effective motivation, and the procedures have changed much less than the terminology. The procedure involves a number of steps.

First, one should establish a specific objective, such as a particular skill to be improved. Second, determine a baseline, which is the child's present level of unsatisfactory performance. Third, arrange steps to be learned in an appropriate sequence, starting with the simplest and most fundamental. It is desirable to begin below the baseline so as to insure success in the child's early efforts. Provide extra cues and prompts if necessary to get correct responses. Fourth, use positive reinforcement when there is a correct response. Reinforcement can be anything which the child regards as rewarding. At the beginning, concrete reinforcers may be most effective; later, privileges, praise, and social recognition become preferred kinds of reinforcers, and the child's recognition of his own progress is the most powerful of all reinforcers. Fifth, behaviors that you do not want to be repeated should be ignored rather than punished. Natural consequences, however, can be used. For example, if on a particular day a child is so restless and noisy that he is preventing the rest of the group from learning, he can be told quietly that he doesn't seem to be able to work today, and be removed temporarily from the group. Sixth, do not attempt to reinforce every correct response. Instead, one should reinforce

frequently at first, then intermittently and at a gradually decreasing rate. Some teachers like to use tokens as reinforcers, a certain number of tokens being exchangeable for a specific prize or privilege. When this is done, the amount of successful work needed to obtain a token should be increased by stages. Artificial reinforcers become less necessary as the child's satisfaction from successful learning grows.

Handling Relationships Within a Group. When a group is new, it is natural for them to be highly competitive. Some of them have previously learned that the only way they can win is by cheating, and others try to establish their own superiority within the group by calling attention to blunders made by other group members, and by making sarcastic remarks. The teacher should accept this as normal and try to change it gradually. The teacher should repeatedly point out that all of us have had trouble in learning to read, and what counts is each one's progress, not who makes mistakes. Making mistakes is a normal part of learning. Each group member is helped to construct his own progress chart and to record his own progress on it. The teacher shows no interest in comparing one child's chart with another's, but praises each child for his own improvement.

The teacher should also praise any group member who encourages or supports another member, while ignoring derogatory or sarcastic remarks. Gradually the group will become more mutually supportive. It is also helpful to spend some part of the group's time in reading games in which chance plays a large part, so that the slowest learner in the group will sometimes win.

Planning for Effective Learning

Remedial reading teachers were among the first to employ what is now called a diagnostic-prescriptive approach. Back in 1940 I pointed out that the typical pattern in classroom teaching is to teach something new, test, and reteach if necessary, while in remedial teaching the pattern is to test, teach to weaknesses disclosed by the testing, retest, and reteach if necessary (Harris, 1940). The test-teach-retest pattern is the essence of diagnostic-prescriptive teaching.

Diagnosing Learning Needs. Remedial reading teachers use tests for two quite different purposes. One is to measure progress; this will be

discussed later under accountability. The other is as a basis for planning the instructional program for each child.

Remedial teachers do not have to do elaborate testing in order to recognize a child's needs and select learning activities for him. Each period's activities provide diagnostic information. The remedial teacher can make better use of this information than most classroom teachers, for two reasons. The first is that he or she can focus attention on the child, with much less distraction than in a large classroom. The second is that the remedial teacher is trained to interpret and analyze the child's efforts; not just to count right and wrong answers, but to explore how and why they were made. Accumulative experience with the kinds of errors ^{made by} poor readers ~~make~~ makes it easier to interpret them.

One of the most useful diagnostic techniques for the remedial teacher is to ask the child to go over items again, this time doing his thinking out loud. This can give the teacher insight into the procedures the child is trying to use, and why they work or do not work for him. Remedial teachers have time for this kind of qualitative analysis and should use it frequently. It can be employed for items the child gets right as well as for errors; for silent as well as oral reading; for meaningful reading or words in isolation.

Reading teachers often use an informal reading inventory to determine a child's most appropriate levels for instructional and independent reading. There is, however, considerable controversy over the standards to be applied. Cooper (1952) studied the relation between the percent of oral reading errors made by children in the reader they were using and the amount of improvement the children made in reading during a school year. He found that at most grade levels the fewer the errors, the greater the average growth in reading, and 5 percent seemed to be the upper limit of word recognition errors for a satisfactory rate of improvement. He therefore recommended that the upper limit of the instructional level should be placed at 5 percent, so far as accuracy of word recognition is concerned. His findings still seem valid. On the whole, children in a remedial program will gain more from a large amount of easy reading than from a smaller amount of challenging reading.

Sometimes a child seems unable to profit from a particular technique. The alert teacher will switch him to an alternative technique. For example, many a child who seems to be unable to blend single phonemes can blend successfully when the word is divided into phonograms, syllables, or morpheme units.

The child's feelings are as important as his abilities. If he has an aversion to "baby stuff" it may be necessary to use a language-experience approach with him for awhile. If he has become allergic to phonics because of overdosing, eliminate phonics for awhile and emphasize visual resemblances, kinesthetic reinforcement when necessary, and effective use of context cues.

Planning for Effective Learning

In a sense, all of the suggestions made above are intended to make effective learning possible. There are two remaining areas which seem to warrant specific mention.

Planning the Learning Period. In an efficiently planned remedial period every child is doing something useful practically all of the time. One plan for a 40-45 minute period that has worked well is as follows:

- | | |
|------------|--|
| 5 minutes | Assignments, getting materials, cleaning up at end of period. |
| 10 minutes | Teacher-led group lesson, often the introduction of a new subskill. |
| 15 minutes | Follow-up exercise to give practice in applying the group lesson. During this, teacher has time to work individually with two or three children. |
| 10 minutes | As children finish the follow-up exercise they move to an individual activity, often self-chosen from several options. |

A basic plan such as this allows for considerable flexibility. A child who does not need the group lesson may be excused from it and have more time for individual activities. A follow-up exercise may be omitted on some days to allow the teacher time to read an exciting story to the group, or more time for work with individual children. Many other variations are possible. The presence of aides or volunteers increases the amount of

individual attention each child can receive.

Providing for Success in the Rest of the Curriculum. Many a child's growing self-confidence has been shattered when he tried hard in a remedial program and made apparent progress, and then was told at the end of the year that he would have to repeat the grade or year because of failure in other subjects. This is all the more tragic because so often it can be prevented.

As a first step, the remedial teacher should consult with other teachers on how to schedule the children so as to interfere as little as possible with other important subjects. Secondly, discussions can be held with teachers on how the remedial teacher can help in the content areas. This may bring out such ideas as getting someone to read assignments to the child at home or in school, finding alternative easier texts and references for the child to use, recording a text on tape or cassette for a child to listen to, and testing poor readers orally instead of in writing. As a child nears his normal grade level in general reading ability his remedial program can be modified to provide training in how to master technical vocabulary and how to get as much information as possible from difficult books. Specific help can be given on such matters as how to read an arithmetic problem, and how to study required spelling words.

If a remedial pupil's promotion is in question, the remedial teacher should be objective in trying to predict the probable outcome of promoting or non-promoting. If it seems probable that with continued help in the remedial program the child will be able to do passable work in the next grade, a persuasive argument for promoting the child can be made.

Accountability and Remedial Reading

With the educational budgets in many communities under sharper scrutiny than ever before, remedial reading programs must expect to be challenged to demonstrate their worth. In the past, many remedial teachers have felt that time taken for systematic retesting was time that could better be spent in regular teaching activities. Such an attitude is no longer practicable. Retesting at appropriate intervals is necessary to demonstrate the value of the program.

Standardized tests are better suited than informal tests or criterion-referenced tests for the purpose of periodic administration to measure progress. Equivalent forms make it possible to retest without repeating the same items. The testing should include tests of word recognition, accuracy in oral reading, and comprehension in silent reading. The grade scores on standardized tests are easily explained to parents, school board members, and other concerned laymen. The gain score obtained by subtracting a pretest score from the score after a period of remedial help is also a simple concept. The gain score can be easily converted into a per cent of normal progress and compared with the per cent of normal progress of the same children before entering the remedial program.

For example, Ted, a fourth grader, was pretested in September, entered the remedial program two weeks later, and was retested in June. His average reading grade was 2.7 in September and 3.9 in June. Counting the remedial period as a full year his gain was 1.2 and his per cent of normal progress was 120. Before the fourth grade he had had three years of reading instruction and his grade score of 2.7 represented 1.7 years of progress over beginning first grade. In calculations of this type it is essential to remember that the grade score scale starts at 1.0, not at zero. Thus his previous rate of progress was 1.7 divided by 3, or 57 per cent. His remedial progress was therefore a little better than twice his previous rate of progress. However, entering fifth grade with a reading grade of 3.9 meant that he was probably not ready to be discharged from the remedial program, unless the fifth grade teacher would be able to give him the help that he still would need.

For those who want a measure of improvement that takes the child's learning potential into account, the Reading Expectancy Quotient may be used (Harris and Sipay, 1975). A Reading Expectancy Age is found by combining the child's mental age with his chronological age. Reading age divided by expectancy age gives a quotient which is near 100 for those making normal progress, and below 90 for those with reading disabilities. Satisfactory progress is shown when the child's Reading Expectancy Quotient after a period of remedial help is higher than his quotient was before remediation.

Some measurement specialists (e.g., Thorndike, 1963; Yule and Rutter, 1976) have criticized the methods just described on the ground that they do not allow for regression effects. A regression effect is the tendency that when pupils with high or low scores are retested with an equivalent test, the retest scores tend to be closer to the mean. They therefore propose computing an expected score from a regression equation and comparing the retest score with that expected score.

This proposal ~~does~~ does not agree with the well-known fact that children who are not given remedial help just do not regress toward the mean; instead, they tend to fall farther and farther behind. The expected score from a regression equation sets an unrealistically high expectation, and in some cases can turn a real gain in reading into a theoretical loss.

The challenge for accountability is often met by comparing children's status at the time of leaving the remedial program with status before entering it. We have, unfortunately, very few reports on the long-time effects of remedial reading instruction. These few studies seem to indicate that the results of short-term remedial help tend to fade out. Those given long-term help of two or three years, however, tend to continue to improve (Jalow and Blomquist, 1965), and some of them can go on to meet the challenges of college and graduate school successfully (Robinson and Smith, 1962; Rawson, 1968).

It seems probable, therefore, that discharging pupils from a remedial reading program before they are ready may in the long run defeat the aims of the program. Programs which arbitrarily limit a child's attendance to eight weeks or 16 weeks must be challenged to show that they provide lasting benefits.

I suggest two criteria for judging whether or not a child is ready to succeed without further remedial help. The first is ability to read required assignments in his regular program with passable comprehension. The second is the establishment of the habit of doing some reading for pleasure, thus continuing to practice the hard-won new skills. If both of these conditions have been met, continuing progress can be

expected; with either missing, there is a real possibility that progress in reading will come to a halt when remedial help is stopped.

There are other indicators of the success or failure of a remedial program besides the reading gains of the children. They include such diverse items as attendance records, frequency of disciplinary infractions, continuation in school beyond the compulsory attendance age, teacher ratings of work, effort, and personality, ratings and reports by parents, and self-reports and ratings by the pupils. All of these can provide accessory information on the success of the remedial program. A remedial program is an item easily crossed out of a budget, and facts are needed if it is to be convincingly justified.

One final suggestion. Knowing general principles such as those discussed in this talk is important, but learning when and how to apply them does not come overnight. Specific situations have unique characteristics that need to be taken into consideration. For remedial teachers as for remedial pupils, mistakes are a normal and necessary part of the learning process. A successful remedial teacher is alert to evidence on what is working well and what is not. This may come from the reactions of the pupils, their parents, or their classroom teachers. Becoming aware of a problem is the first step toward its solution. The successful remedial teacher is continually appraising every aspect of the program and trying to make adjustments that will produce still better results.

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