

CHAPTER 3

THREE STUDENTS AND A TEACHER

Before we go from the general overview of all the components (Section 2 of the previous chapter) to suggestions for how you might wish to setup your classroom (Chapter 4) and how you might introduce each component to your students (Chapter 5), I would first like you to have an idea of what you might expect your classroom to be like once you embark upon this approach to the teaching of reading.

Anthony, Denise and Russell are three of the thirty-two students in Ms. X's kindergarten class. The description which follows outlines the sequence of progress for each of these three students and their teacher through the reading program in their first year of school. Your classroom will most likely not be exactly like Ms. X's, but regardless of your own grade level, you will find that many of her experiences will be your experiences as well.

Ms. X

Ms. X had not used the Baratta-Lorton Reading Program before and was somewhat uncertain what to expect as she began the process of introducing it into her classroom. She did not know how the students would react and was also unsure how their parents would view this new way of teaching. She knew that, on the whole, parents in her district tended to be very traditional in their approach to education and wanted their children taught in the same traditional or 'basic' ways that they themselves were taught, even though many of the parents failed to learn effectively when taught that way.

Ms. X had the approval of her Principal to use the program in her class this year. But this approval represented more of a 'wait and see' attitude, and not any strong belief that the program would help her children learn. She felt the approval was reluctantly given and probably wouldn't have been given at all if she had been teaching first grade. The Principal's attitude was more

that its okay to try this thing out in kindergarten, because kindergarten isn't all that important. Kindergarten is just building with blocks, painting on the easel and playing dress-up in the play house. School doesn't really become important until the first grade.

The first few weeks of the year in a kindergarten classroom are filled with such things as learning how to do without one's mother for three or four hours a day, discovering how to find the bathroom, (and in some cases when to find it), sorting out whose cubbyhole is whose, learning to eat one's own snack and no one else's, memorizing the rules for going down the slide and not up, and so on.

There is no set timetable for how quickly a class of new students can adjust themselves to what it means to be in school. In Ms. X's class, though, after school had been in session nearly a month Ms. X felt ready to introduce her students to her new reading program. In subsequent years, Ms. X would find that she began introducing the reading activities earlier and earlier, until eventually she would find herself beginning the activities the first week of school, just as would be done in a first grade classroom. This would not be, however, because of the same kind of pressure placed on first grade teachers to get on with reading as fast as possible. It would be, instead, because she knew her students would really enjoy the activities and she would be anxious to begin them quickly.

In late September, Ms. X gathered up her nerve and began introducing her students to reading. (Actually, from the very beginning of the year Ms. X's students had been working at something called "practice learning stations" in anticipation of the eventual introduction of the program, but that had only been 'practice'. Now she was ready for the reading to begin.) Ms. X started the program by reading her students a story she said was called, "DEKODIPHUKAN" (Decode-if-you-can). Ms. X had been reading stories to the whole class each day since the start of the school year and, initially at least, DEKODIPHUKAN seemed no different than the rest. With the introduction of the first few

sounds, however, the differences became evident.

Ms. X elected to read the DEKODIPHUKAN story to her class, as opposed to playing the cassette tape of the story as she merely turned the pages. She had, however, listened to the tape at home on her own, as she followed along in the book. She had wanted to hear the tape in advance of reading the story to her class because she wasn't sure she would be able to say all the sounds correctly. The tape gave her more confidence in her ability to match each sound with its picture. Even though she found the tape useful for her own learning, she preferred to do her own reading to her class. Her students were already used to her voice at storytime and she felt more comfortable being in complete control of how much or how little of the story was read each day.

Each day's reading time was followed by a review of the new sounds learned that day as well as those sounds learned on each of the previous days. Ms. X had read in the teacher's manual that sounds are not as easily learned when taught in isolation. So, she was anxious to see what difference it would make when her students began learning the sounds in the context of words.

Once her children had learned the first four sounds, Ms. X began teaching them how to blend two sounds together into a word. Being careful only to introduce words which contained sounds already covered in her reading of DEKODIPHUKAN, Ms. X introduced the two-sound flip book to her class.

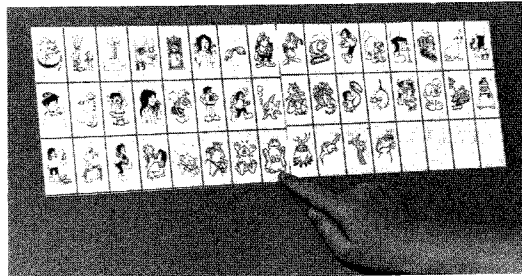


Since the two-sound flip book was a whole class activity, there was no way Ms. X could tell with certainty who was learning to blend sounds into words and who was just verbally copying his or her neighbor. Even though she could not tell for sure who was learning, she knew some children must be understanding what they were being asked to do, because the class as a whole was able to read

the words along with her and, when asked to, could read them without her help as well.

Just as Ms. X could not really tell which of her students were blending and which were not, neither could her students themselves. The collective group was providing a secure environment for the students who were not yet able to understand. For this reason, no individual students were ever called upon to read any of the flip book words by themselves. The words were always read by the whole group. Those students who were able to learn how to blend in this group presentation, did so. Those who were not able to learn at this level of activity did not have their inabilities signaled out and, in fact, were usually completely unaware they were not doing something that others around them could do.

While still operating at the whole group level Ms. X made use of the sound review charts to conduct an informal assessment.



Ms. X placed in front of each student a sound review chart. As she said each of the sounds which had been learned so far, she asked each child to point to the appropriate picture on his or her own sound review chart. As they pointed, Ms. X walked around the room observing. She did not tell her students to which sounds they should have been pointing, so there was no way for her students to know for sure if they were right or wrong. She said the sounds; they pointed to the pictures they thought made those sounds; she observed their pointings and made mental notes.

A week or two into October, Ms. X decided that because the informal assessments had gone well and because her students, at least collectively, could read the two-sound words she taught them from the flip book, it was time to intro-

duce picture packets at one of the work stations. Her students had learned enough sounds that she could have introduced the triangle and circle levels of the packets, but Ms. X did not wish to take on more than she felt she could handle effectively in her first experience at teaching the program. So Ms. X elected to confine herself and her students to only the triangle level of the program.

Ms. X was hesitant to begin because she didn't know what to expect, but her hesitancy was outweighed by her curiosity. She was quite anxious to see how her students would respond to reading the sounds on their own. Ms. X had not yet finished reading DEKODIPHUKAN to her students (she had only been reading for about two weeks and only covered about sixteen sounds) but she knew that if her students didn't start using the sounds for reading, they would have forgotten most of the early ones by the time she'd taught them all forty-four.

In preparation for the eventual introduction of the various reading program activities Ms. X had created five practice learning stations. Each station contained an activity which her children could engage in without the need of her presence once the initial introduction of the station had been accomplished.

Ms. X set up the following five stations:

- 1) Puzzles (Eventually replaced with Workjobs -- see page 271)
- 2) Lego Blocks and Tinker Toys
- 3) Library (picture) books
- 4) Coloring with crayons
- 5) Clay and Play Dough

Ms. X had established the stations at the start of the year. She had taught her students how to work at each station, how to clean up their work and how to move on to the next station. She had also taught them a procedure for rotating from station to station.

Because Ms. X had chosen only to introduce the triangle level of the picture packets, she assessed her students only on the words and sounds at the tri-

angle level. Since her students had already learned how to rotate from learning station to learning station with very little teacher intervention, Ms. X picked the learning station period to call children over to her one at a time for their assessment.

Using the individual assessment sheet provided in the kit's blackline masters, Ms. X spent about a minute each assessing every child in her room. She already had a pretty good idea of what she expected the results to be for many of her students, but she assessed all of her children anyway, so she could verify her opinions on those she thought she knew and generate opinions on those who were still a mystery to her. At the end of about a half hour of assessing, she knew who was ready for the picture packets the next day.

On successive days, Ms. X introduced the triangle level two-sound picture packets, worksheets, books and stamping activities. She introduced each activity in its turn, and made sure its use was understood before introducing the next. The level of understanding for which Ms. X was checking at this point was only how well the children could get the activity out, set it up, work at it, clean it up and make another selection.

At this point, Ms. X was only concerned about the procedure associated with doing each new activity introduced. She was not yet checking to see how well, if at all, anybody could read the two-sound words. Reading would come later. Right now, the important part was to make sure each child, or at least each group of children, knew exactly what was expected of them at each station. Since, for the most part, the procedure for each activity at each station would not change as higher levels of materials were introduced, the time spent now teaching correct procedures would not have to be repeated as each new activity was introduced.

Regardless of the results of their individual assessments, all students in class are taught all of the sounds and all students in class are exposed

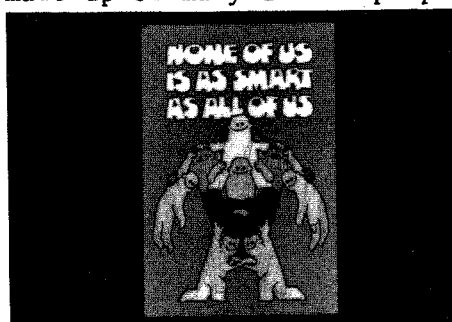
to each whole class lesson with the two-sound, and eventually three-sound, flip book. There are three reasons why all students are to be exposed to lessons which only a few may understand at the time of the presentation.

First, students who do not yet always remember which sound goes with which picture or who do not yet understand how to blend two sounds into a word, benefit greatly from the modeling provided in the whole class lessons by their classmates who do know the sounds and who do know how to blend sounds into words. Students who need this modeling cannot experience it if they always work alone or with other students who share their present short-comings.

Second, it is very difficult and time consuming for the teacher to have to divide the class up into successively smaller groups so that only those children who are 'ready' to learn a given sound or a given word are the ones actually taught that sound or that word.

One of the unique features of the Baratta-Lorton Reading Program is the freedom it offers students to learn from one another. If, for example, a student cannot remember what sound a particular picture represents, he or she does not ask the teacher for the sound. Instead the child is taught to ask a classmate. Only in the case where no one else in class knows, does the teacher become the resource for an answer. Because classmates are to be the resource, and not the teacher, presenting the sounds to the whole class equips as many students as possible with as many sounds as possible. Not every student will learn every sound from these whole class lessons, but it may be counted on that, collectively, the whole class together will know all the sounds.

There is a poster on the wall of a classroom that expresses this program's view of shared knowledge in the classroom environment. The picture on the poster is of a large person made up of many little people.



The caption says, "None of us is as smart as all of us". This is as true in life as it is in the classroom. The Baratta-Lorton Reading Program is designed to let each individual child capitalize on the knowledge possessed by the whole class.

When the picture packets, worksheets, books and stamping activities are introduced, the 'None of us is as smart as all of us' philosophy is introduced in class to emphasize that not everybody knows everything so we all need to help each other whenever we can. Someone may be better at kicking a ball or jumping a rope. Someone may be better at remembering the sounds or adding up numbers. It doesn't matter who's best at what. None of us knows everything, so we must all help each other by sharing what we know.

The third reason the whole class lessons continue, even though the individual assessments have clearly indicated that some students simply are not ready to absorb more sounds or blend sounds into words, relates directly to the feelings each student has about himself or about herself as a learner. If learning is to take place, children need to be ready to learn. If children believe they are not capable of learning then it becomes very difficult to teach them anything at all.

Fifth or sixth grade students placed in classes for the educationally handicapped because they have not learned to read, do not experience the same learning difficulties as non-readers at the first grade level. First graders who, by the end of the year cannot read, most typically lack the home background or maturation necessary to become readers using the traditional methods employed to teach them. On the other hand, students at the fifth or sixth grade level who have not yet learned to read are, by this age, usually mature enough to handle the skills reading demands. They have also been in school long enough so that any deficiencies they may have brought with them from home have usually long since been made up by the school.

If these same fifth and sixth graders had shown up in first grade as mature as they are now, and knowing as much as they know now, they might have be-

come the best readers in their classes, not the worst. But these same fifth and sixth grade students who have been maturationally ready to read since the second or third grade, have, in actuality, not learned enough about reading to escape their classification as educationally handicapped. In many cases this is so because, though they are now maturationally ready to learn to read, they have acquired such a negative feeling about themselves as learners that they now block out or resist all efforts to teach them.

From kindergarten or first grade forward, those students have been taught subtly or not so subtly that they are too dumb to learn. Their plight is such that whenever they face a reading lesson, they have already given up on themselves as learners before the lesson starts. It is much better for their egos if they do not try. If they don't try they can always tell themselves and those around them that they could have done it but they didn't feel like doing that stupid kid's stuff. If, on the other hand, they try and then fail, they are left with no ego saving excuses. They are only left with more proof of how dumb they are. This means that in many cases fifth and sixth grade students who are now perfectly capable of learning to read, in terms of their own maturation and their school acquired readiness background, cannot learn to read because they block all efforts at teaching them in order to protect their own fragile egos.

When introduced to learning to read with the aid of the Baratta-Lorton Reading Program, a good number of upper grade educationally handicapped students have learned to read by Christmas. This is because the students had been maturationally ready to learn to read for quite sometime.

The third reason the whole class lessons continue even though they may be beyond the comprehension of some students, is to produce a positive effect on the feelings of the very students who may seem to be getting the least out of the lessons. Students who take longer to learn the sounds or to learn how to blend these sounds into words will learn sounds and blending. They may need to mature a little more first, or learn a little bit more from their school envi-

ronment, but they will learn. In fact, the only way we could keep children from learning with this program would be to teach them that they were too dumb to learn. If we do that, even accidentally, then when they've matured enough to learn the skills which reading requires of them, they will no longer feel themselves capable of learning.

To insure that the slower students always feel as if they are equal participants in the class learning experience, Ms. X will continue to spend a part of each day throughout the year presenting lessons or activities to the whole class. All students, slow and fast, should always be made to feel that they are an important part of the whole class. There is more to learning to read than just saying back words.

Ms. X continued reading DEKODIPHUKAN and introducing new sounds at the same daily rate she employed before she began introducing her students to the learning stations. She also continued to use the two-sound flip books to teach the sounds in context.

As soon as her students had learned how to operate successfully at the new learning stations, Ms. X used the individual assessment sheet to reassess each student so she could decide who was ready for the next levels of two-sound words and change their assignments at the work stations accordingly.

About the end of October or the very beginning of November, Ms. X reached the end of both the DEKODIPHUKAN book and the two-sound flip book. She then switched to the three-sound flip book for her whole class lessons.



The thought of starting three-sounds made Ms. X a bit apprehensive. She had students, like Anthony, who still couldn't understand what two-sound blending was all about and who could not even remember the first eight sounds with any degree of regularity. Apart from Anthony, she had students spread out at all the reading levels she had given them so far. Denise was past the triangle level and had started with circles, but Russell already knew all forty-four sounds, and was reading the star coded words with ease. Ms. X felt pressured to introduce three-sounds to keep Russell from becoming bored. But she didn't want the class to get too spread out! Her hope was that the three-sound words would slow Russell up.

Because Russell and a few others seemed ready for the three-sound level of activities, Ms. X began the three-sound flip book lessons with the entire class. Since the lessons were conducted in a group, those who couldn't have done the blending all by themselves were able to follow along with their classmates.

Few, if any, of us understand how the human brain accomplishes learning. We can devise materials or experiences which we can see allow children to learn and we can use what we observe to judge some materials or experiences as better than others in encouraging this process. But we cannot say what is actually going on inside the child's head that makes this learning take place. One day a child comes to school not knowing something. The next day, the child knows it. What happened inside the child's head from one day to the next? No one knows.

We cannot know what causes these spurts of learning but we can set up an environment which encourages them. By constantly enveloping children in the whole process of reading, even beyond what individual children seem presently ready to understand, we allow each child's mind the opportunity to ponder 'reading' in its own way.

This program is structured so that it surrounds the child with the concept

of reading. The sequential progression from two-sounds to three-sounds to phrases and beyond allows children to see the underlying structure or pattern for blending sounds into words and forming words into sentences. But not all children see the same relationships in the same way. If we are to make maximum use of each child's potential for learning, then we must surround (but not overwhelm) the child with reading.

Most of this reading should be at a level we know he or she can do, but equally important, the child should also be exposed to levels we don't think he or she can do. As long as what can't yet be done (or at least what we suppose can't yet be done) is presented to the child in a non-threatening way, the child's mind can receive it and act upon it in its own undefinable way. Children will learn to read if we choose only to expose them to the tidy logical steps of progress through the various levels of picture packets, worksheets and so on. But we enhance their mind's ability to go beyond what we think they can do if we expose them to concepts beyond those for which we feel they are 'ready'. The mind cannot work wonders if we give it no challenges.

Ms. X had not been anxious to introduce the materials at the three-sound level because she had not wanted her students to become too spread out in the range of activities they were using. Despite her reluctance, the needs of her students compelled her to move ahead. To understand both Ms. X's reluctance and her students needs, we will now add to Ms. X's story the parallel stories of three of the children in her classroom. First, Denise.

Denise

Denise was the kind of child who liked school. She didn't like school because of all the learning she could do there. She liked school because that's where all her friends were. Her favorite time of the day was recess. Her next