

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.

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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

favorite time was P.E. and her next favorite was snack time (it would be lunch time when she reached first grade).

Although Denise didn't love school work, she didn't hate it either. If, when she reached first grade, Denise were given textbooks for reading and textbooks for math and textbooks for science, she wouldn't find the textbooks exciting. She would use them to learn what she was told. She would also be quite content to plod through the textbooks day after day for the rest of her years in school, because there was always recess and P.E. and lunch, and because school was where her friends were.

As Ms. X was reading DEKODIPHUKAN to her class, Denise was able to learn each new sound as it was presented. When Ms. X introduced the two-sound flip book, Denise had no trouble blending the two-sound words. It was difficult to tell from observing her, however, whether Denise was saying each word because the people around her were saying it or because she actually knew what the words were.

When Ms. X gave Denise an individual assessment, the results were not as conclusive as Ms. X would have liked. Denise could blend some of the two-sound words on the assessment sheet but she couldn't blend all of them. The ones she couldn't do she was apt to read as some word completely unrelated to the two sounds she had been asked to blend. However, Denise did know all of the sounds she was asked to read, so Ms. X decided Denise would be one of the ones she would count as ready to start work with the triangle level picture packets.

As Ms. X's experience with the reading program grew, she would learn that the reason Denise could 'blend' some words and not others was because Denise hadn't yet really learned how to blend. She had, instead, acquired a sight vocabulary of some of the words from the flip book. She knew all of the sounds, so she could recite each sound she saw in a word. After saying the sounds she would then say the word. Since she already recognized the word, she would erroneously give the impression that she had read the word by blending the two sounds together. She would simply guess at the words she didn't have in her

sight vocabulary. Her guesses, though, were usually confined to those words she knew she was supposed to have learned.

Denise was not trying to mislead anybody. She did not yet really understand what was being asked of her. When Ms. X said each new set of two sounds in the flip book and blended them into a word, Denise heard the sounds and then heard the word, but she had not yet figured out what the game was. She didn't know that the word Ms. X said actually came from blending the two sounds together. All she had figured out so far was that you said the sounds and then you said a word. Sometimes she got the word right and sometimes she didn't. That's the way school was.

Even though Denise wasn't really able to blend sounds into words yet, Ms. X was right in deciding Denise was ready to begin the triangle level of the picture packets. The level of knowledge Denise possessed would allow her to say all of the sounds at the triangle level and match many of the words she would read with their correct picture from the packet. Denise's discovery that she could actually read the words by listening to the sounds she was able to say and hearing in them the word they represented, would come to her soon enough. The discovery might come as a result of a specific lesson given at her station by Ms. X. It might come from hearing the sounds and words said by the others at her station. Or, it might come from an "ah ha!" experience in her own mind as she repeated to herself the sounds and the words she had learned to associate with them.

Since Ms. X wanted Denise's mind to have as much exposure as possible to the patterns associated with learning to read, Denise began 'reading' as soon as she had enough knowledge to be able to sit at a learning station, to say some sounds and to say some words to go along with them. At this point, Denise thought reading was a magic that only adults knew, because only adults, like Ms. X and her parents, could get it right all the time. In a little while Denise would discover that reading is magic, but she knew the magic, too.

The group with which Denise worked at the picture packet learning station and with which she rotated through all the other learning stations as well, was made up of students who represent a hodgepodge of different ability levels. One or two of her group were like Russell, who could say the sounds and blend the words. They could even blend the sounds for words which were not in the teacher's flip book. Since Denise did not yet know the magic of blending sounds into words, she didn't have any idea that Russell had a different way of knowing what the words were than she did. Anthony was in her group, too, but he knew even less about the magic of reading than she did.

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An important element of the Baratta-Lorton Reading Program is the maximum utilization of the knowledge individual students may possess, through sharing this knowledge with others. If any student knows what sound a picture represents, that student becomes a resource for any student who does not know. The same philosophy of students serving as resources for other students extends through all aspects of the program. Students who need help in blending words, or in understanding the instructions for a worksheet, or in making use of the decoding chart, are taught to turn to their classmates for assistance.

This emphasis on students helping students has two purposes. The first is to maximize the amount of help available to each individual student. If a child doesn't know what to do and must wait for the teacher to be available to provide an explanation, a great deal of learning time is wasted. Even a teacher moving at top speed taking no time to pause and rest could only be with each child individually for about a minute or two an hour.

The second purpose is to allow the teacher the freedom to help whomever he or she wishes. If the class is set up so that everyone can operate without needing to ask the teacher what a sound is or what word goes with which illustration, then the teacher may take the time to provide special assistance wherever he or she feels it would be the most beneficial. Maybe Russell is ready

to learn a new activity, which he will, in turn, teach to the next students who become ready. Maybe Anthony needs to learn how to operate a tape recorder so that he can be made to feel special by teaching others how to use it. (It isn't just the brighter students to whom other students may turn for help. Ms. X has it in her power to make any student a necessary resource for other students.) Maybe Denise and one or two others in her group would benefit from a special review of the process of blending two or three sounds together to form words. Maybe its just time to wander around the room and provide some positive reinforcement for how well the various groups are working together and helping one another. Whatever the need, when students learn to turn to each other for help, the teacher is free to judge where his or her own special form of encouragement and assistance might best be used.

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The emphasis on students helping students is the reason why Ms. X placed Denise in a learning group represented by a hodgepodge of abilities, despite the knowledge Ms. X gained from her individual assessments. If students are to help one another, then each group of students should represent a variety of skills. If Denise were grouped only with students who shared her mystification over the blending process, how would she be able to have frequent exposure to students who had already figured out the magic? If Russell, as he moved ahead in reading, were isolated from his classmates, then how many times would Ms. X have to reteach all that Russell had learned about the next steps of the program?

Although Ms. X did not assign Denise to her group based on ability, Denise's placement was not random. Ms. X spent a great deal of time deciding which of her students would work well with which other students. She noticed, for example, that whenever Anthony and Tommy sat next to each other for story time, they could not seem to keep from poking and tickling one another. Whenever they were together they seemed to have a permanent case of the giggles.

Russell, on the other hand, seemed to have a calming effect on Anthony. They enjoyed playing together at recess, but Russell wasn't a giggler, so Anthony always seemed more in control around him. Russell and Anthony were, therefore, put in the same group. Denise and Sandy both liked Ricky and each wanted to be with Ricky wherever he was. Ricky, on the other hand, hated girls (he'll get over it!) and didn't want to have anything to do with either Denise or Sandy. So, Denise was in one group, Sandy in another and Ricky in yet a third.

Each group was structured to have as compatible a learning team as Ms. X could devise. Students who had more energy were placed to work along side students who were, by nature, calmer. As Ms. X had the opportunity to see the groups she had formed work together, she made changes as necessary to achieve the compatibilities she sought.

Students knew with which group they were to work by the color of the yarn necklace Ms. X had made for them. So, changing a student's work group was as easy as cutting a new length of yarn.

Denise began her independent reading experiences at the triangle level with the picture packets and the two-sound word cards. When Ms. X later introduced the triangle level worksheets and stamping activities, Denise found that the words she could read to go along with the picture packets she could also read when they were on worksheets or stamping activities. This same reading ability carried over as well to the two-sound books Ms. X added to the book station.

Each time Denise was given an individual assessment to determine if she was ready to move up to a higher coding level of two-sound words, she read well enough to be moved up. She never quite knew all the words on each new section of the assessment page, but her ability to recall the sight vocabulary she was acquiring always allowed her to read most of the assessment words correctly. In any event, her assessments showed she always knew all of the sounds at the two-sound level of the program. At this point, Denise's rate of progress was

hardly distinguishable from that of Russell. Russell, too, passed each new assessment Ms. X gave him, though he passed his assessments by reading all the words, and not just most of them, as was the case with Denise.

Ms. X had decided to confine the materials she presented to her class to the two-sound level until she had introduced those of her students who were ready, to all five of the coding levels. By the first part of November all of the two-sound coding levels had been introduced. Ms. X's class had also learned to operate comfortably at the learning stations. In addition, Ms. X had had the opportunity to work with her students individually on a fairly regular basis. She had a pretty good idea which students were having an easy time of it and which students still had not caught on to the magic of being able to blend sounds into words.

Ms. X was still using the individual assessment sheets to verify when a child was ready to move on to a new level. But the assessment sheets were now more of a written record which could be placed in each student's file, in case administrators or parents wanted documentation as to how she had made her decisions to change the level of each child's activities. From her daily contact with her children, Ms. X already knew what the assessments would show her before she did them. She knew in advance of the assessment, for example, that Russell was quite ready to begin work with three-sound words. She knew, too, that Denise was having too much difficulty at the two-sound level to be ready to move on just yet.

Throughout October and November, Denise continued working on the variety of two-sound activities from which she was able to choose at each station. Occasionally, Ms. X would take Denise and one or two other children aside and have them blend each of the words in a packet of two-sound word cards for her, as she reviewed for them the process of blending sounds into words.

In early November, Ms. X felt comfortable enough with how well the program was running in her classroom that she no longer felt as threatened at the thought of letting Russell and a few others move into three-sound blending.

Russell had been ready for three-sound words for a while, but Ms. X hadn't been ready for him to be ready. Initially, she had felt that if she let students move ahead when they were ready, that she would be overwhelmed with too many different questions about too many different things from too many different people. She could see now, though, that except for the length of the words the students would be asked to read, the three-sound activities were no different than the two-sound ones. If Russell were ready to try three-sound words, there wouldn't be any extra work load put on her for letting him begin using the three-sound materials.

Now, for the first time in the reading period, it was apparent that Denise and Russell were not operating at the same level of ability. Even though Denise had learned several of the three-sound words as a result of Ms. X's work at the whole class level with the three-sound flip book, Ms. X did not elect to assess Denise's readiness for three-sound activities. Ms. X was not yet content with Denise's understanding at the two-sound level. Denise could do all of the two-sound activities reasonably well and was certainly a big help to anyone in her group who might forget how to say a particular sound, but her knowledge of the words still seemed too erratic and inconsistent. Although Denise could read a great many of the two-sound words with which she had had experience, if Ms. X stamped out a two-sound word Denise hadn't seen before, Denise was usually at a loss in reading it. Denise, therefore, stayed at the two-sound level while Russell moved on.

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Although Ms. X decided not to assign Denise to the three-sound level of activities, a different decision in Denise's case could equally well have been justified. The words Denise was able to read at the two-sound level she was reading pretty much because they were sight words for her. She was just beginning to catch a glimmer of the notion that maybe the sounds she was always asked to recite before she said the word, had something to do with the word it-



self. Maybe the sounds were actually a clue as to what the word might be. Since Denise was able to do so well at the two-sound level because of her acquired sight vocabulary, most likely she would have done nearly as well at the three-sound level also. Had Ms. X chosen to assess Denise she might have learned that Denise knew almost as many three-sound words as she did two-sound words.

Ms. X's decision not to assess Denise was made because Ms. X wanted Denise to overcome her erratic two-sound reading before advancing to a more difficult level of the program. Ms. X's decision was a reasonable one. However, as Ms. X gained more experience with the program, she might decide next time to allow students in Denise's situation to advance to the three-sound level, even though they might not yet be masters at blending two sounds into words. Denise's mind would grasp the concept of blending sounds into words. For her mind to make sense of this process, however, it would need ample exposure to the concept. The work Denise was doing with the two-sound level of activities would provide this exposure. Since Denise also possessed a sight vocabulary of three-sound words, her opportunity to be exposed to the concept of blending sounds into words would actually be enhanced by allowing her to combine her work with two-sound words with three sounds as well.

Although Ms. X could have made the decision to allow Denise to begin three-sound picture packets at the same time as Russell began, Denise would not be harmed by this lack of exposure. Her turn would come eventually. It was better for Ms. X to be too conservative about allowing people to advance, rather than being too hasty, in a rush to move everyone ahead as quickly as they could be pushed. Students learn at their own rate. When they have learned what we need them to know at one level, they won't be shy about showing us how ready they are for whatever comes next.

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Denise's reaction to Russell's being allowed to begin the three-sound picture packets, worksheets, and so on, was in direct relationship to how Ms. X presented the three-sound materials to the group. Since Ms. X did not heap praise on Russell for being ready to work with three-sound words, Denise didn't feel compelled to rush on to three-sound words herself. Ms. X had simply announced that she was going to show Russell how to use the happy face picture packets. She had also said that as others in the group became even better at reading their two-sound words she or Russell would show them how to blend three-sound words, as well. If others in the group wanted, they could try out some of the three-sound packets either after they had finished their own two-sound work or during free choice time later during the day.

Denise took Ms. X up on her offer to let anyone else in the group who wanted to, try reading the three-sound words as well. Ms. X had provided this option to keep the other children in Russell's group from feeling that the teacher somehow didn't think they were smart enough or capable enough to learn something more difficult than they were already doing. Anthony, too, occasionally took out the three-sound word cards and picture packets and looked through them. Whereas Denise would set out the illustrations and try to match the word cards with the appropriate pictures, Anthony seemed content just to look through the materials. Anthony was still struggling with the first few two-sound words in the program, but it seemed to make him feel good just to know there were no materials that were off limits to him. The attitude Ms. X had wanted to convey to Denise and to Anthony and to everyone else was that their turn would come. Learning doesn't take everybody the same amount of time, but everybody learns.

Now that Russell had begun the process of three-sound blending, Denise had a new model of learning to observe as her group proceeded from work station to work station. It wasn't so much that she watched everything that Russell did. It was more the case that she now could see that something came after the two-sound work she was doing. She already knew three sounds were next. She had

learned about three sounds in the whole class lessons with the flip books. What she was beginning to learn now was that the adults, like Ms. X and her parents, weren't the only ones who knew the magic of reading. Russell seemed to know it, too. But Russell was just Russell. He wasn't an adult. Maybe the magic wasn't quite so magic after all.

Throughout all of October and November Denise continued her work with the assorted two-sound activities, and varied her routine with an occasional 'free choice' exploration into three-sound activities. She and her classmates also had time for reading activities in December but not very much time. December was filled instead with making Christmas presents for parents and learning carols and one act plays for the Christmas Assembly. Half of December was spent on vacation, where, it is said, no school learning at all takes place.

When Denise returned to school in January, after her Christmas hiatus, she could read two-sound words. When I say she could read two-sound words, I do not mean she could recite the words which she had stored in her sight vocabulary. I mean, she could see two sound pictures, blend their sounds together, and hear the word they formed. She could do this for words she had already seen and she could also do this for words she had not before seen stamped out. She could even do this for words which she formed for herself with the rubber stamps, when she stamped out whatever combination of sounds she felt like stamping even if the 'words' she read were not words at all. Denise had finally figured out the game called "reading". Now she knew the secret of the magic, and now she had the magic, too.

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Denise's coming to school after Christmas Vacation knowing how to blend sounds, when she had left for vacation not knowing how to blend these same sounds, is both typical and atypical. It is typical, because this event or a similar one repeats itself for almost all students at some point or other. Sometimes, as for students like Russell, the 'catching on' happens so quickly

that it seems as if the teaching in the lesson itself produced it. Sometimes, as for students like Anthony, the 'catching on' happens in such small steps that it doesn't appear to have happened at all.

Anthony will finally grasp the idea that the sounds he hears are what make up the particular word he is trying to say, but he will not then automatically extend this concept to the next word he reads, as would Russell immediately and Denise fairly quickly. The extension that Denise's mind made when she understood that sounds became words was that all words were made up of sounds she could hear. Russell had seen the pattern immediately. It came to Denise after her mind had mulled over all the evidence in its own mysterious way. For Anthony, on the other hand, it would take the separate discovery of the sounds to word association in many different words before his mind finally says to him, "Yes, there is a pattern here you can believe in. What you learn for one word does relate to other words as well".

Denise's learning was not typical only in that for her it occurred over Christmas Vacation. 'Typical' means the most common. While it is not unusual for children who leave for Christmas Vacation not knowing what the magic is, to come back having made the discovery as Denise did, there is no 'most common' time for this to happen. It may happen overnight or over a weekend. It may happen in the middle of a lesson. It may happen in such small doses (as in Anthony's case) that it doesn't appear to have happened at all. There is no typical time for it to happen. The only thing typical is that it happens for all.

The human brain as a pattern-seeking device learns by seeking out and making relationships. The children who have the best potential for learning, both in and out of school, are those whose minds are the most highly developed as association pattern seekers. Since the brain is already organized at birth to seek patterns and relationships, the children who are to be the best learners are those children whose environments or backgrounds have done the most to encourage their mind's natural capabilities.