

Chapter 1 Introduction

Can You Read This Word?

cat

I am sure you can, and so can many of the children in our classrooms. Our students who look at the word **cat** and read it as "cat" are not the ones who cause us the difficulty we face in teaching children to read. These students can read. Our concern is for the children who, when we ask them to read, look at the word cat and say, "cow?" or "at?" or something even more inventive. These children cannot read. The Baratta-Lorton Reading Program has a special importance for these children.

At the present time, about 85% of the children in our schools learn to read. By some standards, an 85% success rate is a very high score. However, 85% who can read means there are 15% who cannot. The group of non-readers represented by this 15% is not distributed in uniform numbers throughout our school population. Some elementary schools may only have a 1% or 2% non-reading rate, while other schools may find as many as half their students are functionally illiterate by the end of sixth-grade. Whether a school's rate is 1% or 50% is not important. In terms of the waste of human potential and the immense personal suffering that is the fate of non-readers in a literate society, any percent is too high.

It has been reported that between 80% and 90% of the inmates in our penal institutions are functionally illiterate. Our society places great importance on the ability to read. People who cannot read have few socially acceptable career options open to them. The legitimate choices that remain for the illiterate offer little promise for the future. Readers, quite simply, have a better chance for success in our society. The Baratta-Lorton Reading Program is especially effective in making readers out of the 15% of students who are generally classified as non-readers, and who are not now being served by traditional educational methods. However, it is also of real value to the 85% of students who will learn to read regardless of the program used. Kathy's Story is an example of why this is so.

Kathy's Story

Kathy, was a child who was about to repeat kindergarten for the third time. No, she hadn't been held back. Kathy was only five years old when she was to begin her third year. She was a precocious child who was able to read by age three. Her mother had persuaded their previous local school to admit Kathy to kindergarten as a three year old. At age four, Kathy had had to sit through a second year of kindergarten, because she and her family had moved, and a kindergarten enrollment was the best the mother could get from the new district, since four year olds were not admitted to first-grade. When I first met Kathy, her family had moved again, and once again Kathy's mother could do no better than a kindergarten enrollment for her daughter. There were no five year olds allowed in first-grade, in this new district either.

I was not Kathy's teacher. I met Kathy because her mother had been

sent to me to register her complaint about the reading program her daughter was about to use. As the creator of the program that was in use in that classroom on an experimental basis, I was the person to receive such complaints. Kathy's mother's concern about the program was specific and to the point. The program would be a waste of her daughter's time. The purpose of the program was to teach reading to non-readers, and Kathy could already read. Kathy's mother wanted me, as the program's creator, to ask Kathy's teacher to exempt Kathy from having to undergo any of what the mother regarded to be the meaningless activities associated with the program.

I asked Kathy to read me a storybook. I was impressed. She could most definitely read. There is more to succeeding in school and in life than being able to read, however. I told Kathy's mother that I did not think it would be wise to isolate Kathy from her classmates by excluding her from the reading lessons at the beginning of the school year. Clearly, at the end of this school year Kathy would finally be promoted from kindergarten to first-grade so, unless the family moved again, Kathy's present classmates would be her classmates next year as well. Unless the mother wanted her daughter to be a very bright child with few friends, Kathy should not be forced to set herself apart from her classmates any more than was absolutely necessary.

There was nothing in the reading program that would cause Kathy to unlearn any of the skills she already possessed. She wouldn't find it boring or repetitive either, because she had never used it before. It was true that she didn't need a program that would teach her how to read, but at least it would do her no harm to use it. Kathy's mother agreed to let Kathy try the program, on condition that if Kathy found it too dull and boring I would help her mother earn an exemption for her daughter.

Kathy's mother paid me a return visit two months later. Her report was that Kathy was now reading things she had never been able to read before. No, she was not reading *The Brothers Karamazov*. Her new adventures in reading were much more mundane. Kathy was reading the labels and listings on cereal boxes and candy wrappers. She was also reading newspaper articles and street signs and billboards and anything and everything in her environment that contained words to be read.

Before, Kathy's reading had consisted of children's storybooks. She possessed an incredible sight vocabulary that was the product of her remarkable visual memory. Her parents had only to read her a story once or twice (it had taken four or five times when she was still a three year old) as she sat looking at the pages, before Kathy could read the story back to them. Kathy could read because she had complete recall of all the words she ever had read to her if she'd been able to see the pages during the reading. But she had no way of reading words that had not been read to her as she watched. She had no word attack skills.

What the reading program did for Kathy, with its emphasis on the sound and letter patterns that are the basis for all words, was to allow her to understand reading. She still had her huge store of sight words, but she could now look at words that were not part of that store of knowledge and

understand what those words were. Her parents had not read cereal box and candy wrapper ingredients lists to Kathy, but Kathy didn't need to rely upon what her parents had read any more. Now Kathy could truly read. The program had not taught Kathy to read. She could already read. However, the program did make Kathy more excited about reading and more versatile in the range of things she could read comfortably.

Three Difficulties

Now, back to the word **cat**. If, in arithmetic, we present our students the abstract problem $4 + 3 = ?$ and they cannot provide us with the answer, 7, our choice is either to have them memorize the correct answer and parrot it back to us on command, or to provide them with a set of experiences that will both lead them to understand what the abstract symbols represent and let them translate this understanding into an answer to the problem.

If we make the choice to provide our students with experiences that will allow them to make sense out of $4 + 3$, it follows logically that we would present the experiences before we introduced the abstract symbols that we will eventually use to record these experiences. We would begin at a concrete level by allowing each child to count out a pile of, say, four blocks, then a separate pile of three blocks and then slide the two piles together to get the seven block total the two piles together would produce. We would delay introducing symbols to our students until this counting out, adding up process was understood at the concrete level. Symbols would be introduced only to record an experience that already had meaning.



It is only when the relationship between the event and the symbols that are used to record the event is clearly understood that a child is ready to give meaning to the abstract description of the event, represented by the symbols themselves. The symbols $4 + 3$ have no meaning for the child unless they stand for something that does have meaning and unless the child has been allowed to make this connection in his or her own mind.

In reading, unlike arithmetic, when we are faced with children who are unable to make sense out of the abstract symbols that form the word **cat**, there has been no way for us to provide a set of experiences that lead these children to see what the abstract symbols represent and then let the children translate this understanding into meaningful reading. There has been no way to back the child up to a concrete stage and then bring the child forward again with understanding.

To compound the problem, the abstract symbols from which the child is

to draw meaning if he or she is to be able to read, offer at least three levels of difficulty not to be found with the more straightforward symbols with which we record arithmetic concepts. These three levels of difficulty are:

- 1) Visual discrimination - perception
- 2) Auditory association - sound-symbol
- 3) Sound blending - blending of discrete sounds into recognizable words

Visual discrimination as a problem means the child has difficulty distinguishing or identifying letter shapes. In the word **cat** the letter **c** is often confused with letters like **u** or **o**. The letter **a** is confused with the letter **d**, among others. The **t** is confused with the letter **f**. The reading efforts of the child who has perceptual difficulties are doomed from the outset if the child cannot know with certainty which letters are in the words that he or she is expected to read.

Auditory association as a problem means the child has difficulty in connecting or matching the phonetic sound to the appropriate letter symbol. Assuming the child can recognize the symbols, he or she must still identify the sound each symbol makes in a particular word. In the word **cat**, the child must know if the **c** sound is to be the one heard at the start of the word **city**, or the one at the start of the word **cut**, or maybe even the one at the start of **child**. Is the **a** the same as in **said**, or **above**, or **cake**, or **saw**, or **father** or **map** or maybe even **eat**? The list seems endless to the child. Is the **t** in **cat** from **top** or **the** or **thin** or who knows what else? A child who has difficulty making the appropriate sound-symbol associations becomes overwhelmed by the choices that must be made for even the shortest of words.

Sound blending as a problem means the child has difficulty in taking all the information produced if the problems of the first two areas are correctly solved and then combining that information to form a word. As an example, for the word **cat**, even if the child correctly recognizes the three letters and is able to identify which sound each letter makes in this particular word, the child who has difficulty blending the sounds into a recognizable word won't read the word **cat**. The child is apt to blend the sounds "**c a t**" and then say "**cow?**" or maybe "**at?**"

Giving Meaning

In arithmetic, we can give meaning to abstract number concepts by guiding our students through a series of manipulative experiences that provide them with a basis for understanding how numbers of objects relate to one another. Once the concept is understood concretely, we introduce the abstract symbols as a means of recording the event already experienced.

The purpose of the Baratta-Lorton Reading Program is to teach reading and writing. This purpose is accomplished by providing children an opportunity similar to what already exists in a manipulatively based mathematics program. That is, this program allows children to pass through a series of experiences that provide them the basis for understanding how

sounds and groups of sounds join with one another to form words and sentences before any letters are introduced. When the concept is understood at a concrete level, children are introduced to the abstract symbols so that they may record the reading and writing experiences they've already encountered using letters. In effect, the children who pass through this program learn to read and to write before they need to know the alphabet, just as children in a manipulatively based mathematics program learn to add and subtract before they record any of their learning experiences with numbers.

The series of experiences that comprise this reading program are designed to allow each child to begin learning to read at an earlier, less abstract starting point than has previously been possible. The experiences themselves have also been devised specifically to isolate and overcome the visual auditory and blending problem areas that confront beginning readers, so that each difficulty may be faced and overcome by the child in its turn and not, as now, be allowed to overwhelm the child all three at once.

The Nightingale's Nest

Before beginning the description of the activities that make the Baratta-Lorton Reading Program unique, I would first like to relate to you a very short story told to me when I was in elementary school. My story has nothing to do with reading or learning to read. It is simply meant to encourage you to read the teacher's manual before beginning use of this program with your children.

There was a time long ago when all the birds came to the Nightingale and said, "Oh Nightingale, your nest is so beautiful! Won't you please tell us how you build it. We, too, would like to live in such a beautiful home."

So, the Nightingale consented to share her building secrets. All the birds gathered around to learn what there was to learn.

"First," said the Nightingale, "I take some mud...".

"I see," said the mud hen, and she flew away to build her nest.

"...and then I take some straw..."

"I see," said the duck, and she flew away to build her nest.

"... and then I take some sticks..."

"I see," said the sparrow, as he, too, flew off to build his nest.

And so it went. Each time the Nightingale told of a new material, another of the birds said "I see" and flew away, until, at last, only the Nightingale was left, with no one else to hear what more she had to say.

We teachers are notorious for 'flying away' before an explanation is completed. Hardly ever do we read all the way through a teacher's manual before we decide we understand enough to begin. Remember, what you hear at the start is only the mud and the straw. You won't really know how the whole nest is built until all the pieces have been fit together.

Rationale

Traditionally, the alphabet cards that appear on the walls above the chalkboards in many primary classrooms have each separate letter matched with the picture of an object. The picture is meant to serve as a reminder of what sound is most commonly associated with that particular letter. A picture of an apple might appear above the letter 'a', for example, so the child may be taught that 'a' is for apple. Each letter of the alphabet, from the 'a' in apple to the 'z' in zebra is associated with a corresponding matching picture.

One of the problems with this form of letter-picture association is that there is only one sound associated with each letter, whereas many letters make more than one sound. In addition, for a child to know what sound a particular letter might make, the child must first correctly extract that sound from the pictured word. For children who experience difficulty in learning to read, this is usually an insurmountable task.

In the year 1948, there appeared a set of alphabet cards that were based on a completely different approach to letter-sound association. Instead of matching, say, the letter 'm' with a picture of a mother, the new cards pictured a boy eating an ice cream cone and going 'mmmm' with the pleasure such good eating brought him. Instead of matching the letter 's' with a picture of a bar of soap, the new cards represented the 'ssss' sound by air leaking out of a tire.

These alphabet cards matching letters to pictures that directly represented the appropriate sounds, as opposed to pictures that only represented a word from that the child had to extract the sound, were demonstrated to be a highly effective method of allowing children to make correct sound-symbol associations. The most notable research documenting the efficiency of this method was completed at the University of Wisconsin in 1975. This research was reported in the manuscript: Pre Reading Skills: Theoretical Foundation and Practical Applications - Wisconsin Research and Development Center for Cognitive Learning, 1975. Obviously, it was much easier for a child to identify the sound made by the letter 'z' if the letter's 'zzzz' sound were associated with the buzzing of a bee, than if the letter's sound had to be sorted out from all the other sounds that make up the word 'zebra'.

Although alphabet cards that matched letters to appropriate sound-pictures were a more efficient learning tool, the use made of these new cards was the same use made of the traditional cards. Each separate letter was matched with a picture representing its appropriate sound. The cards formed by these pairings were then posted above classroom chalkboards to replace their predecessors. The cards themselves served only as a reminder for children who might forget what sound a particular letter made.

The Baratta-Lorton Reading Program makes a more basic use of sound-picture cards.



The three pictures immediately above represent three sounds.

The snapping sound represented by the picture of the breaking stick is the sound heard at the end of the word **luck**.

The crying sound represented by the picture of the baby is the sound that can be heard in the middle of the word **lad**.

The ticking sound represented by the picture of the clock is the sound that can be heard at the end of the word **meat**.

The rationale for why these pictures represent these particular sounds is provided in the *Dekodiphukan* section of Chapter 2.

When these three sounds are placed side by side, they form a word. Can you read the word that is formed when these three unique sound-pictures are placed together? If you have difficulty in reading, remember to start at the left of the word, say each sound in order:  then , then . If you have any difficulty remembering what sounds the pictures represent, you may review the brief description of the sounds each picture makes. Once you've said each of the sounds in order, then blend the three sounds together and see if you can hear the word they make. Try not to add any extra sounds into your blending and don't drop a sound out either!

If you read the word, congratulations! If not, find a friend to share the experience with and try again. Reading isn't always as easy as it looks. As you were trying, either successfully or unsuccessfully, to read the word, you were facing the same kind of problems a child faces when attempting to read the word **cat**, with two notable exceptions:

First, the visual discrimination (perception) problem associated with letters is no longer present. Each picture in the word is visually quite distinct from the other two pictures in the word. Each sound-picture used in this program is specifically designed to eliminate the opportunity for visual confusion with any other sound-picture.

Second, the auditory (sound-symbol) problem associated with traditional letters is no longer present. There are forty-four sounds in English that form the building blocks for all the words we speak and read. In this program, each of these sounds is represented by its own unique picture. There is, therefore, a one-to-one ratio between the sounds and the pictures that are used to represent them. When a child sees a picture, he or she does not have to remember which sound the picture represents in this particular word. The sound is always matched with the same symbol.

The actual number of sounds or phonemes that are used to compose all the words in the English language differs slightly depending upon the linguist one consults. The forty-four sounds herein employed are drawn from those

used as the basis for the Initial Teaching Alphabet - ITA.

Sound-pictures provide children who are learning to read with the potential of a much more manageable learning experience than they encounter when initially presented with traditional words and letters. However, there were three areas of difficulty mentioned earlier above confront the beginning reader. So far, we've dealt with solutions to only two of these areas. It is the third area, though, that may have given you the most difficulty as you attempted to read the word represented by the three sound-pictures above.

Just as the child would, you had to take all the information produced by mastering the visual and auditory problem areas and combine it into the forming of a word. Depending upon the difficulty you had, or are still having, in forming the three sounds into a recognizable word, you may have had the opportunity to observe first-hand that being able to recognize the symbols and say their sounds correctly does not automatically guarantee you would then recognize the word **cat** once you had separately vocalized each of its sounds.

Using sound-pictures as a beginning teaching tool simplifies the learning process for the child. It does not, however, eliminate the need to teach the child the process involved in blending sounds into words. Using the sound-pictures allows each child to concentrate on the single problem area of blending, without yet having to focus attention on the two parallel stumbling blocks of visual discrimination and sound-symbol association.

Use of the sound-pictures provides the child a starting point in learning to read that is comparable to the starting point that is provided by concrete materials in learning arithmetic. With the sound-pictures in reading, as with the manipulative materials in arithmetic, the child is allowed to understand what is happening before he or she is introduced to the abstract symbols that will be used to record this understanding. Children who have found themselves overwhelmed by the complex problems associated with learning to read, now have the opportunity to confront the process through a manageable and logical series of interrelated steps. Use of the sound-pictures makes it possible for the beginning reader to approach each of the three problem areas one at a time, while allowing other areas of difficulty to wait until it is their turn to be overcome.

This reading program has been tested and retested on thousands of children. All that these children have taught us is combined in the materials and activities about that you are now to learn. The goal of this program is that all children learn to read and to write with no exceptions. Whenever a child had difficulty with any aspect of the program, the program was altered to accommodate that child's special needs. The result of this adaptation to the needs of all of the children is the Baratta-Lorton Reading Program. We are confident that you will enjoy sharing this program with your children. We are confident, as well, that you will be most pleased with the increased levels of understanding and enjoyment of both reading and writing this program brings to your classroom.

And now we shall begin to learn how the nightingale builds her nest.