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 time was snack time. It would be lunch time when she reached first-grades.

Although Denise didn't love schoolwork, she didn't hate it either. If, when she reached first-grades, Denise were given textbooks for reading, 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, 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 Flipbook, 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 assessed Denise, 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 Flipbook. 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 recognized the word, she would give the erroneous impression that she had read the word by blending its 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 Flipbook 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 those 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 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, say some sounds, and 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 was 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 that were not in the teacher's Flipbook. 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.

An important element of the 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, have learned 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 provide special assistance wherever he or she feels it would be the most beneficial. Maybe Russell is ready to learn a new

activity, that 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 it's just time to wander around the room and provide some positive reinforcement for how well the 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.

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 alongside 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 had learned to read to match with the Picture Packets pictures, 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 that 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 the words in a packet of two-sound word cards for her, as she reviewed with 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, she would be overwhelmed with too many different questions about too many different things from too many

different children. 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 workload 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 Flipbook, 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.

Although Ms. X decided not to assign Denise to the three-sound level of activities, a different decision in Denise's case could also 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 itself. 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. 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 eventually 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, 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.

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 workstation to workstation. 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 Flipbooks. 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 assumed that 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 that 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 that 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.

Denise's return 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 relates 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, and 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 will happen for all.

The human brain is a pattern-seeking device that 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.

A child who sits in a parent's lap and watches the turning pages as the parent reads a favorite story over and over again on subsequent evenings is being given an experience that the child's mind can convert into the notion that the words on the page have a meaning, and the meaning remains the same for reading after reading. The child who has never been read to, though his or her mind has the same capability of perceiving the pattern, comes to school without a background for accepting that words have some unvarying traits.

A child whose early life is filled with verbal explanations from parents and other adults about what that big animal is in the zoo, or why you aren't supposed to pull the hot sauce pan off the stove onto your head, or where Mommy is going and when she will be back, expects the world to make sense. A child, on the other hand, who reaches out for something one time and has his or her hand slapped with no explanation given, while another reaching out time may be allowed, or who is surrounded by adult silence and inarticulation, and who isn't likely to see the zoo until a school field trip, does not expect the world to make sense. Children who are not given reasons, learn no reasons exist. Things happen because they happen.

One difference between children who learn in school and children who do not learn is that children who learn believe they are capable of knowing. Children who do not learn, do not think they are capable of knowing the explanations for things. Russell knows he can know. He expects to learn. This isn't even a conscious expectation. It is simply a part of him. Anthony has not brought with him to school the same full knowledge of his capabilities to know as did Russell.

Not all home environments are universally rich in allowing children to develop their potential, or universally deficient in providing the experiences needed to keep children actively involved in their learning process. Russell doesn't need school to supplement his potential as a learner. School can help Denise because it can add to the background she brings with her from home. It may take Denise longer than Russell to see that she is capable of knowing things she previously thought she wouldn't understand until she had obtained the magic of adulthood, but her background has given her the knowledge that at least some things are learnable by children.

Anthony does not expect the world to make sense. He does not expect the knowledge he has of one thing to relate to the knowledge he has of anything else. He has ten toes, so adults must have twelve. Oklahoma has a sun, California has a sun, so he draws two suns in his picture.

When Anthony understands how to blend sounds together to read one word, he does not understand that this same blending process can be extended to the next word. For Anthony, each word is its own separate lesson. He sees no patterns. His mind has forgotten how. For Anthony, school must be both the supplement to the background and the background itself. Anthony needs school to teach him to learn, and to help him learn that he can learn.

The Reading Program is designed to allow children to see the patterns

and relationships that underlie the concept of reading. Children whose backgrounds have actively encouraged the pattern-seeking potential of their minds are capable of drawing the appropriate patterns and relationships out of even the most complex systems of reading instruction. These children, like Russell, would learn to read using any reading program.

Children like Denise and Anthony, however, have the greatest chance of learning to read comfortably and with confidence when they are allowed to understand for themselves what reading is all about. Denise would learn to read, or at least to parrot back words she had learned to recognize, because of her ability to memorize a sight vocabulary. But this process of memorizing words would not take advantage of the same potential for rapid and growing learning to which Russell has access. For Denise to realize her own mind's capabilities, she, too, must be allowed to see the patterns that will help her make sense out of learning. Anthony doesn't have Russell's belief that he is capable of knowing, and he doesn't have Denise's memory. It is better to help Anthony relearn how to use his brain, so that he can see the patterns it was born to see, than to try to teach him to have a memory he does not have.

Denise could read after Christmas Vacation because she finally saw the pattern. She finally made the connection in her mind between the seemingly unrelated events of saying two discrete sounds and saying a word. How rapidly students are able to make this connection depends in good measure upon how attuned their minds are to seeking relationships. The more a child's preschool background has encouraged him or her to look for patterns and relationships, the more rapid the learning process is likely to be.

The same rules hold true for the school environment, as well. The more the classroom learning environment encourages students to look for patterns and relationships in the world around them, and the better children become at seeing these relationships, the easier learning becomes for each child to learn. This is as true for reading as it is for any other area of the curriculum. For this reason, particularly in classrooms that contain any number of students for whom learning seems difficult, an emphasis on searching out patterns should permeate the curriculum. The more patterns are sought in all areas, the more the learning in any one subject area transcends the narrow confines of a curriculum and becomes learning in all areas.

Denise had learned to read two-sound words, so she was now ready for three. Ms. X wasn't exactly sure what had made the difference for Denise. The class hadn't spent very much time at all in December on reading. Denise wasn't likely to have spent her whole Christmas Vacation studying on her own. Why, then, had she come back from her vacation knowing more than when she left? This was certainly not Ms. X's usual expectation from children returning from vacation. However, Ms. X wasn't going to worry about why it happened. She was just very glad that it had happened.

Denise passed her three-sound assessment with ease, so Ms. X was more than a little surprised to discover that Denise could not read as well at the three-sound level as she had just become capable of at two. It had been Ms. X's opinion that once Denise understood that sounds fit together to form

words, all words would then be equally readable. Russell hadn't seemed to have any more trouble with three sounds than he had encountered with two. What Ms. X learned from watching Denise read three-sound words was that there is much more to reading than simply knowing how the game is played.

Denise had learned the game. She knew that what she was supposed to do was say the sounds, listen as she was saying them, and hear the word these sounds made. When she finally understood that this was what she was supposed to have been doing all along, she was then able to sail through all of the two-sound words she was asked to read. Almost all of the two-sound words had become quite familiar to her in the months she had previously spent reading them or hearing others around her read them. Even though she now knew what the game was, she could not automatically read all of the three-sound words she encountered, at least not right away. She could, of course, read each of the sounds in each word, and she knew she was supposed to listen to these sounds to hear the word they made. As she began at the three-sound level, however, she did not yet have sufficient practice at actually blending sounds together to always recognize the word that the sounds formed.

Denise had not really had much practice blending words when she was at the two-sound level. By the time she had her post-Christmas revelation as to how sounds went together to form words, she had already learned most of the two-sound words as sight words. These words, then, had not given her much practice at the actual process of blending sounds into words. This practice was now coming at the three-sound level.

What Ms. X learned from watching Denise that she hadn't had a chance to observe from Russell, was that knowing what the game is isn't the same as being good at playing it. Knowing is the essential first step, but converting the knowing into a usable skill involves the actual experience of saying sounds, listening to what has been said, and hearing the word thus formed.

Denise was easily introduced to the Three-Sound Word Cards, worksheets, stamping activities, and books. All Ms. X had done was give Denise formal permission to begin using these activities. Denise had learned the process of three-sound blending from the whole-class lessons with the Flipbooks. She already knew the procedures for doing each of the new activities because they were done in exactly the same manner as the comparable two-sound activities. And, finally, Denise had already seen Russell working on these same activities. In fact, Russell's work at the three-sound level had occasionally inspired Denise to jump ahead to the three-sound activities on her own during her free time.

Since Denise already knew how to do all the activities and since she also already understood the process of blending, there was not much else Ms. X needed to do for her besides let her go through the activities and acquire the necessary experiences that would help her convert knowing the game into being an expert at playing it. Occasionally, Ms. X would spend some time working with Denise on the process of blending sounds into words, but this was not usually necessary. Denise did not start off as well at the three-sound level as Ms. X had expected, but Denise surprised Ms. X equally as much by

the steady progress she made without any special teacher assistance at all.

Because the introduction of new levels of activity proved to be so easy, Ms. X let each new person she decided was ready, to begin work at the three-sound level as soon as the readiness decision had been made. Ms. X had originally planned to wait until five or so people at a time were ready, so she would be able to minimize the times she would be engaged in explaining new activities. Her experience with Russell, however, showed her that such delays were unnecessary. Since everyone already knew how to do the activities, any child who was ready could simply be allowed to move on.

The exceptions to this any child who was ready rule were Russell and the others at the most advanced level. Since Russell was always in the forefront, Ms. X always had to make quite sure she understood what Russell was to do next before letting him begin. Russell made her a little nervous, because he was always ready for the next step before she was even sure what the next step was. Next year, she would be as far ahead of the Russell's in her class as she was now ahead of the Denise's, because she would already have been through the entire program with this year's class. For now, however, Ms. X could console herself with the fact that it was only the Russell's who were the problem, not the children who were less advanced.

Denise continued working on the blending activities for three-sound words until about the end of February, by which time she had really mastered the art of blending sounds into words. Although her official activities were all at the three-sound level, Denise had also been free-stamping longer words and using them for blending practice. She had also participated in the whole-class experience stories that Ms. X had introduced in January as the activity to follow the Three-Sound Flipbook.

The experience stories had exposed both Denise and her classmates to words composed of any number of sounds, from two sounds to quite a few sounds. She hadn't been able to read all of the words in each story, but she had, at least, understood that each of the words was made up of sounds she could hear. In many cases, Denise had actually been able to blend the sounds for even very long words without any help from Ms. X.

All the while Denise's efforts were directed at causing her to become an expert at three-sound blending, her learning environment was already being filled with reading that required more than just the blending of three sounds.

Although it wasn't true for Denise, it is the case that some students who have experienced a great deal of hard-earned success at one level of learning are reluctant to go on to the next. A next level is, by definition, more advanced, and therefore more difficult than the present level. Children like Anthony, for whom learning presents more of a problem, may be reluctant to go on to a next level. If the present level has been mastered with any great degree of difficulty, the child may feel much more secure continuing at the level of the known rather than endure the uncertainty of having to advance to a new area of unknowns.

Even though the two and three-sound levels of the program represent the most difficult levels in terms of learning, there are children who, once these

levels have been learned, are reluctant to move on to the phrase level because it must be more difficult than what they have just learned how to do. For the teacher to say to these children that the phrase level isn't any harder, because the phrases are only made up of two or three-sound words the children can already read, does not have much effect. Adults are always saying things won't hurt, like shots in the arm or trips to the dentist, but things can still hurt.

All of this is why the Reading Program has the two and three-sound activities paralleled by experiences in reading phrases as well. Students ready to move from work with three-sound blending to work with phrases have already been exposed to phrases and longer words through experience stories, books, free stamping activities, and the modeling provided by students like Russell in their groups, who have already begun their work with phrases.

Denise was looking forward to working with phrases when her turn came. Anthony would be more apt to indicate reluctance to pass from a secure level of learning to a less secure one, despite his being surrounded by experiences at the next level before his formal introduction to it. For Anthony, then, the introduction of a new level should also include the permission to stay at the old. For each new activity attempted, an old activity should be allowed as well. Moving ahead to a more difficult level can be made more palatable if the student is allowed to move back, as well.

Ms. X found that introducing Denise to the phrase level of activities was almost as easy as it had been to allow her to begin work at the three-sound level of activities. The phrase cards used the same Picture Packets as Denise had used at the two and three-sound levels of activities. The books were the same as she had begun reading at the three-sound level. The worksheets were used in the same manner as had been the case at the previous two levels. The only change was in the stamping activities.

Whereas for earlier levels of stamping, Denise had used a series of different stamping worksheets, the Tiny Writing Cards that she was to use now were closely related to only one of her former stamping worksheets. However, this narrower focus did not add any difficulty to preparing her to operate on her own. She had already learned how to do a wide range of activities. All she had to be told was which of that wide range applied to the Tiny Writing Cards she was to use now.

Denise didn't actually have to be told what to do. Since she wasn't the first person in her group to reach the phrase level, she had already seen Russell and a few others using the Tiny Writing Cards. All Ms. X did was ask Denise to explain how she thought the cards were to be used. If Denise hadn't known (although in this case she did) Ms. X would most likely have asked Russell to provide the explanation to her.

Denise did quite well at the phrase level of activities. But Denise's performance still did not clear up Ms. X's confusion as to what she might expect from her students as they progressed from level to level in the program. Ms. X remained unsure of what to expect, because students who had been better readers than Denise at the three-sound level had not initially done as well as Denise at the reading of short phrases.

Actually, the differences in how students learn are caused by the differences in the learning involved. Denise understood the blending process after her experience with two-sound words. Even though she understood the process, she still needed sufficient practice at the three-sound level in hearing sounds and blending them into words before she could convert her understanding of the process into a functional reading skill. Once she had mastered three-sound blending, Denise's excellent memory was now quite well suited to enabling her to excel in the reading of phrases.

Reading phrases means sounding out and blending one whole word, then remembering what that word is while sounding out and blending the next word. Children who are able to blend the sounds in a single word, because they have a well-developed power of auditory discrimination, cannot necessarily also remember the word they have just blended as they sound out and blend the next word in a phrase. This means that children who may have been better than Denise at blending sounds together to form individual words may not be as good as Denise in remembering the words that they have already blended.

At the phrase level, many students without Denise's memory will sound out the individual words in a phrase correctly, each word in its turn, and then remember only the last word blended when reading the phrase. It is as if each new word read pushes out of the child's mind the memory of all previous words read. This problem corrects itself naturally over time because the phrases the children are asked to read are composed of only two or three words each. Each of these words is, in turn, composed solely of one, two, or three-sound words, most of which the students have learned to read. The problem, then, isn't one of having to sound out strange new words at the same time all the words read must be remembered. The problem is only one of remembering a short series of easily read, known words from the time the first word is blended through the time the last word in the series has been read.

Although the process of reading phrases does cause some students difficulty, it is a difficulty that practice alone is sufficient to overcome. The more familiar they become with reading the individual words in each phrase, the faster they can read them. The faster they can read the individual words, the easier it becomes for the students to remember what each past word was when finished reading the present one.

This is the same kind of increased ease of reading students experience as they are able to recall more quickly how to say each of the individual sounds when they are trying to read words at the two-sound level. The longer a student has to think about the sound a given picture represents, the more apt that student is to have forgotten what the first sound in a word was by the time he or she has finally remembered what the second sound is.

This Reading Program is purposefully broken down into small, manageable units, so that every child's mind has an opportunity to absorb the learning from one level before being asked to move on to the next. Breaking down learning into such small units of comprehension does not hinder the child who has no need for such segmented bits of knowledge, as long as the

child whose mind can absorb information faster is allowed to move on at his or her own faster rate.

The breakdown of the learning sequence into small steps does not eliminate the individual difficulties faced by students in mastering the art of reading. The breakdown makes the difficulties that do arise small enough so as to be manageable. The irregular rates of learning progress experienced by individual students are caused by their own peculiar patterns of learning. Whenever a student encounters an element he or she finds difficult, progress is slowed until the difficulty is overcome. Since not all students possess the same pattern of learning, it cannot be expected that all students' progress will be uniform in nature.

Denise spent more time at the three-sound level than Ms. X had assumed she would need. Denise also took less time to advance through the phrase level than Ms. X had anticipated. Although Denise's progress might seem irregular, the irregularity of the rate of learning is not important. What is important is the learning. Denise began her work with phrases around the end of February. By the end of March, Ms. X decided that Denise was ready to move on to the transition and decoding levels of activity.

Although Denise passed through the phrase level of activities in only a month, her progress should not be taken as a rate of progress against which to measure all students. The level each child reaches is the level that child reaches. By this, I mean each child works at his or her own rate and makes whatever progress that rate allows. There is no magical point to be reached by each child by the end of the year, and by which we then determine that child's worth as a student or as a learner.

If we ask our students to start running across a field and then tell them to stop after one minute of running, they will not all be at the same place. Obviously, the faster runners, or those with more stamina, will be farther across the field. The slower runners, or those who are not well-conditioned, will be less far across the field. But all of the children will have been running.

We can provide coaching to those who are not as far across the field to improve their performance. We can provide conditioning to those who are not well-conditioned. We can teach techniques to the inefficient runners. But unless we make the skilled runners unlearn their skills and unless we reduce the stamina of the runners with greater endurance, there will never be a time when we ask our students to run across the field, when they will all be the same distance from the start when we ask them to stop.

A school year is like a run across the field, except that each time we ask our students to stop at the end of a year, we don't bring them all back to the same starting point for the beginning of the next year. The child who is ahead at the end of kindergarten will be farther ahead at the end of first-grades and still farther ahead at the end of second.

If the run across the field is made into a race, the same few students will win all of the time and most of the others would soon give up wanting to try at all. If, instead, the run is made into an exercise in which each child is to be measured only against himself or herself and progress is defined only in terms

of how much one is able to improve one's own performance, then everyone is capable of success. In this kind of run, it becomes worthwhile for everyone to keep on trying and to keep on getting better at the run. The fastest child can continue to run faster and faster and enjoy the improvement this represents. As long as the faster child's progress is only compared to his or her own previous performance, there is no need for a slower child to feel overwhelmed with the difficulty of matching accomplishments that seem beyond reach.

While it is true that a faster child may choose to make a name for himself or herself someday by running against others to see how many contestants he or she can defeat, this form of competition is not appropriate in a classroom. In a classroom, the goal is that all children learn. With this as the goal, the environment must be set up so that all children can feel capable of learning.

The children in class know who the faster students are and who are the ones for whom learning is more difficult, just as children running across a field know who's ahead and who's behind. In a class and in a run that is not allowed to become a race, we are all capable of being proud of our progress, and we are all capable of being winners. In a classroom, how far we get is how far we get. Our pride should come in how far we each have journeyed and in how much more we each know now than we did at the start. None of us is as smart as all of us. When each of us learns, all of us know a whole lot more.

While Denise was still concentrating her attention on the reading of phrases, her passage from phrases to the transition and decoding levels of activity had already begun. The handwriting activities that had occupied one of the learning stations through which Denise and her group had been rotating since November were Denise's first introduction to the transition level. Denise and Russell together had used the Letter Sequence Flipbooks and salt trays to experience the kinetic forming of each letter. They had then used the Letter Writing Worksheets and templates to go over and over how each letter was to be written. Just before Russell was ready to begin his transition-level activities, the first obvious connection between the activities at the Handwriting Station and all of the other reading activities was made. Russell was introduced to the use of the Decoding Chart. When it became Denise's turn to learn about the Decoding Chart, she already had a pretty good idea of what was to be expected of her, since she had already seen Russell using it.

Letters themselves had always been present in Denise's world, both inside and outside of school. Letters were used to form the words her parents read to her from her favorite storybooks. Letters formed the name on the box of her favorite cereal. They spelled out the name of the street on which she lived. They flashed at her constantly as she watched Sesame Street or The Electric Company on T-V. Letters were everywhere. Even in school, Denise had learned to write her own name with letters and, as soon as Russell had begun work with the Decoding Chart, Ms. X had begun both writing out and stamping the experience stories the whole class created together.

The Handwriting Learning Station had as its purpose teaching Denise how to write each letter correctly, so that when she was ready to write the letters used to spell out the sounds she would already know how to write.

Denise's earliest efforts at getting her pencil to do what she wanted it to do had not been very successful. It had sometimes taken her as long to write the letter **m** as it would have taken her to sound out two or three words. The handwriting activities had allowed her the time to learn to write before she actually needed to write.

Ms. X could see from the comfortable progress Denise was making with reading phrases that Denise was ready to begin work with transition-level activities. Just before Ms. X switched Denise to the transition level, Denise was introduced to the use of the Decoding Chart. Since Ms. X had already taught Russell how to use the chart, she was quite confident about showing Denise. Ms. X could have allowed Russell to teach Denise, but she decided instead to present the lessons herself. If Russell had done the teaching, Ms. X could not have the opportunity to assess how clearly and how quickly Denise caught on to what was expected of her.

Denise used the Decoding Chart Practice Worksheets to learn how to use her chart before she was allowed to begin any formal work at the transition level. Learning how to use the Chart was easy for Denise because so many of her previous activities had already paved the way for its use. As Ms. X had read *Dekodiphukan*, she had placed a new Wall Card on the bulletin board for each new sound introduced. The order of the Wall Cards had been the same order as the sounds on the Decoding Chart. The Sound Review Charts had shared this same order in common. So, too had the stamp trays.

The worksheets at the two-sound level and all subsequent levels had always contained color codings that were to be used later on with the Decoding Chart. When Denise had asked what the colors were for, Ms. X had told her that they were to be used when Denise was ready to learn to spell the words she was reading. Denise had also seen Russell using his Decoding Chart to write letters on the worksheets.

Denise knew what the Chart looked like, knew how to find the sounds on it quickly, had seen the Chart being used, and knew, too, how to write the letters she would find beneath the sounds on the Chart. Denise was ready.

Although Ms. X had had some doubts about how well Denise would be able to understand how to use the Decoding Chart, she had no doubts about how well Denise would do with the transition-level activities themselves. In fact, the transition activities seemed easier to Ms. X than had those at the phrase level. Both the Transition Sentence Cards for the Picture Packets and the books at the transition level had phrases in them that were either shorter than or at least no longer than those Denise had been reading at the phrase level. The transition books and sentence cards also still had all their words stamped out. The only difference was that the traditional spelling for each word appeared beneath it. Children were not required to read the traditional spelling. They could read the stamped-out version instead. Ms. X did not see how this would help anyone learn to stop using the sound-pictures, but at least it meant that students would find these activities no more difficult to use than the phrase activities they had just completed.

It fascinated Ms. X to watch Denise read the transition sentences by

beginning with the traditionally spelled-out words. Anytime Denise couldn't read the traditional word, she immediately looked above it and read its sounds instead. The sounds were, in effect, an instant dictionary for how to pronounce any of the words being read. The more Denise used the worksheets, Tiny Writing Cards, and sight words to learn how the words she could read were written and spelled, the less she needed the sound dictionary that appeared above the words in the transition sentence cards and books.

The Transition Worksheets were Denise's first experience at translating her knowledge of the Decoding Chart into writing whole words. These worksheets posed no reading difficulties for Denise because she had already completed these same worksheets successfully at each of the earlier levels of the Reading Program. The first worksheets used at the transition level were the same worksheets Denise had used at the two-sound level of activities. This meant that she already knew how to read every word.

Once Denise completed decoding all the Two-Sound Worksheets, she began again with the Three-Sound Worksheets. She certainly didn't mind doing the worksheets. She found great enjoyment in translating the sounds she had learned to read into the words that she recognized as the same kinds of words her parents, and her teacher always read.

At about the same time, Denise began using the phrase worksheets for her transition activities, Ms. X changed how Denise was to use the Tiny Writing Cards. Heretofore, even though Denise was at the transition level, she had still been using the Tiny Writing Cards to stamp out phrases that she then illustrated. Now, Ms. X asked Denise to decode the Tiny Writing Cards instead.

Since Denise could already read the Tiny Writing Cards, the mere act of decoding was no guarantee that she could then read the traditional words she now wrote. But, since Denise was also continuing to illustrate the phrases she was now writing out in traditional form, Ms. X figured Denise would have little trouble remembering what words she had written on each page.

This meant that the pages written and illustrated from the Tiny Writing Cards could be sent home with Denise, so she could continue to practice her transitional reading skills there, as well as at school. This also meant that her parents would have the opportunity to be impressed with how much Denise was learning at school. Ms. X had not forgotten that parents, too, needed to share in the learning taking place.

In all of Denise's previous experiences with the materials in the reading kit, her knowledge of reading had always been measured by her ability to match what was read to an appropriate illustration. The Sight Word Worksheets were the first program component she encountered that asked for no comprehension on her part whatsoever. All she was asked to do was learn how to write and spell correctly, numbers of very common words; words like a, the, is, to, not, for, be, an, did, just, and so on.

Ms. X had two basic reasons for starting Denise on the Sight Word Worksheets. The first was to supplement and accelerate the process of learning the Decoding Chart. The Sight Word Worksheets made heavy use of the Decoding Chart. They would be, therefore, instrumental in causing Denise

to internalize many of the more common spellings from the chart.

The second reason was to provide Denise with an extensive vocabulary of words that she could write and read quickly and accurately. Denise would not realize the full benefits of this large reading and writing vocabulary until she reached the vowels-only level of the program, which, for Denise, would not occur in her kindergarten year. Nevertheless, Denise would now find herself able, even without having progressed to the next level, to read and write between sixty and seventy percent of all of the words she would encounter in most early reading books.

What Denise had learned in Ms. X's class about reading had been learned in a form that she could carry with her and use wherever she might be. She wasn't a perfect reader yet, but then there are many things at which she wasn't perfect yet. What she acquired, though, was a beginning skill at reading that she could apply at home, or at the store, or on vacation, or at the movies, or wherever else she happened to be. She could apply it because she understood it.

Denise did not transition completely out of the Reading Program in her kindergarten year. She had to wait until first-grades to complete that step. But when Denise began her first-grades year of school, she wasn't simply where she was at the end of her kindergarten year, or even a few steps back. She actually knew more about reading at the start of the new year than she had at the end of the old. We may not know exactly how the human mind learns, but we do know that if it is allowed to seek patterns, it will find them. Denise's mind had continued learning over Christmas. It had continued its search for and discovery of patterns and relationships over the summer months as well. Memory fades. Understanding grows. Denise had come to understand what reading was all about.

Denise did not reach the vowels-only level of activities in her kindergarten year, so we'll have to learn about these activities when we follow Russell's trail of experiences. If Denise had been in first-grades when she started using the program, she, too, would have reached the vowels-only level of activities. She would have advanced farther through the program as a first-gradesr simply because she was a year older. Older children can learn to read much more swiftly than younger ones. Fifth and sixth-grades educationally handicapped students learned at a far faster rate than did Russell, who, for kindergarten, was a very rapid learner.

The older a child is, the more able that child is to absorb and process information. This wouldn't be true of a child who had been locked in a closet each year, but children are not locked in closets. They are out in the world absorbing experiences and gathering information on a constant basis. Denise would learn faster as a first-gradesr because she would be a year older, a year wiser, and a year more practiced at being able to learn.

Since Denise would have learned faster if her introduction to this program had been delayed until she was in first-grades, the question naturally arises, "Why bother exposing Denise to the program in kindergarten at all?" Even though fifth or sixth-grades students learn faster than kindergarten or

first-grades children, it does not follow from this fact that we should delay teaching reading until fifth-grades, because the students will then learn it more quickly. They will learn how to read more quickly if we wait, but they will also learn to read much sooner if we don't. Since knowing how to read is such a useful skill in our society, we teach our students to read as soon as we feel they are ready to learn. We don't wait until they are so old that they would probably have figured out how to read with no help from us. We want them to learn as soon as is comfortably possible, so they can start using their skill at reading to learn all the things that the act of reading itself will expose them to.

We could have waited until Denise was in first-grades to begin teaching her about reading. Because we didn't wait, however, Denise will learn to read and to enjoy reading much sooner. If we had waited until first-grades to begin this program with Denise, she would most likely have reached the vowels-only level in, say, February or March. Now, however, she will most likely reach this final level of the program around October or November. In either case, Denise will learn to read. In the latter case, she is allowed to spend many more months of her first-grades year internalizing what she has learned.

Denise will learn more quickly in first-grades than she did in kindergarten, just as she will absorb knowledge faster in second-grades than in first. How does one know, then, when is the best time to introduce subjects to be learned? If children learn more quickly and more easily as they grow older, what learning should we introduce now, and what learning should wait?

Children are always ready to learn. They are not, however, always ready to learn all things. A four-month-old baby is actively trying to learn language. The more conversation the baby hears, the better it is for his or her learning. There is no point whatsoever, however, in trying to toilet train a four-month-old baby. It just isn't ready to learn that skill yet.

It does children no harm to expose them to learning situations for which they are not yet ready, as long as the exposure carries with it no punishment or stigma if it happens that the child was not yet ready to learn. Readiness is self-determining. If we expose kindergarten students to the process of learning to read, the ones who are ready will learn. The ones who are not yet ready will not learn.

Our role as teachers is to help those children who are ready for it, to learn to read, and to help those who are not yet ready, to acquire the experience and the maturation they need to become ready. It is equally our role to ensure that the students who are not yet ready are allowed the time and the experience necessary to become ready at their own rate, without any pressure being placed on them because they do not learn at someone else's rate. If we allow children to become ready at their own rate, they will learn quite comfortably when their time comes. If, on the other hand, we convey to children that they should be better than they are, or faster than they are, then when they have reached the point where they could have learned, they will no longer feel themselves capable of learning.

Denise was ready in kindergarten. She would have been ready in first-grades, as well. Anthony wasn't ready in kindergarten. Without this program,

he wouldn't have been ready in first-grades, either. The benefits Denise gained from starting in kindergarten were measurable in terms of the greater number of months in first-grades she could spend reading and writing at will. The benefits Anthony gained from his early start were even more pronounced. As a first-grades student, Anthony learned to read.

Anthony's story will have to wait until we learn about Russell. Denise carried us up to the transition level. Russell will take us beyond. Before we learn about Anthony, we will let Russell complete the journey through the program that Denise has started.