

Russell

With Anthony, Ms. X never felt threatened. She occasionally grew impatient with how slowly Anthony seemed to grasp concepts that nearly everyone else understood easily, but she never wondered about whether she had enough learning materials available to keep him occupied. In earlier years, students like Anthony had been a source of frustration for Ms. X because they caught on to everything so slowly. All of her teaching materials seemed to be over their heads. Now, however, she had a whole series of learning activities at which Anthony and the others could work, and that Ms. X felt confident were allowing Anthony to learn at his own rate. She wasn't just keeping Anthony busy anymore, she was teaching him, and that felt good for a change.

Ms. X had never used this program before, but because Anthony was such a slow learner, she was already an expert on any part of the program before it was time for Anthony to use it. Ms. X became such an expert on the program before presenting it to Anthony, because she had already learned about it through teaching Denise, Russell, and almost everyone else in class. Even for the things Denise needed to be shown, Ms. X was not a novice, because she had already been through most of the activities with Russell.

However, Ms. X wasn't an expert at anything when Russell was ready to begin a new activity, since Russell was always the first to be ready. Because Ms. X had never taught any of the activities before, Russell's constant readiness to move on to a higher level was intimidating. Next year, when Ms. X had already survived her first year of the program, students like Russell would not be so threatening. But that was next year! This year, Russell was a frequent source of worry.

There was always enough work for Anthony to do, but how much work was there for Russell? Would he be bored? Would he demand too much teacher attention while trying to learn about things for which no one else was yet ready? Would Ms. X, herself, even understand how to show Russell what to do next? And, if she didn't understand, what would he think of her?

Although Ms. X felt intimidated by the progress Russell was making, this intimidation was not constant. It only appeared each time Russell was ready to begin a new level of activities. Ms. X was never sure what Pandora's Box each new level would open, so she was always nervous about letting Russell begin. Once Russell had actually begun, however, she gradually became more relaxed as she could see that what Russell was doing at each new level was not substantially different from what he had been doing at the previous level. The level was different, but not the format. That is to say, he might be reading phrases instead of three-sound words, but he was still using the same kinds of Picture Packets, worksheets, stamping activities, and so on, that he had used at each earlier level.

Ever so gradually, Ms. X learned not to feel intimidated by Russell's progress. She learned through her own experiences that even though her students were spreading themselves out all the way from the two-sound blending level through how ever far Russell had gone, she was not becoming

overwhelmed by the number of different levels with which she had to deal. Instead, each person to whom she taught something could be used to teach the next person in line. Ms. X already believed that school learning was not a race. Because her students were only in kindergarten, she had not formed any goals in her own mind for how much anyone must accomplish this year. Since she felt no pressure to push Russell to go farther and faster (in fact, she really wished he would slow down), she became quite content to use Russell as a helper for other children who were ready to learn what she had taught him, or what he had taught himself.

Students like Denise and Russell learn to read without having specific goals set for them. When no goals are set for the medium and fast learners, they can then quite comfortably reach their own natural levels. When there are no goals set and, therefore, no pressure exerted to attain these goals, it becomes possible for everyone to take the time to help everyone else. If Russell was constantly praised for how far ahead of everyone else he was, he could very easily convert the joy of learning into the race for learning. He would then no longer wish to take the time to stop and help a friend learn. If learning is a race, then Denise would not stop to help Anthony, because she would be too anxious to catch up with Russell, or keep ahead of her best friend Sandy.

Denise liked school because that's where all her friends were. Russell liked school, too, but not just because his friends were conveniently present. Russell was insatiably curious. He loved to know about everything. He would drive his mother and father crazy by constantly asking them questions. They would do their best to answer him, but they found it difficult to keep up with him. They did not have hours to spend each day looking up things for him in the encyclopedia just to satisfy his curiosity. Russell liked school because his parents kept telling him that school is where you go to learn about everything.

Although Russell's parents were sometimes exasperated by how much about everything he always wanted to know, they were also very pleased with him. They themselves valued learning and, even though they both worked now, in the first three years of Russell's life, his mother had been home all of the time playing with him and teaching him every day. During this time, she had taken him just about every place in her area that she thought he might find interesting. They had been to the zoo, the park, the aquarium, the library, the soft drink bottling factory, the Salvation Army recycling and repair facility, and so on. They had even gone to the museum three times. In their off moments, she had read to him constantly.

When Russell wasn't being read to or going on field trips, he amused himself by listening to records that went along with the little storybooks he had, or by watching Sesame Street or The Electric Company on T-V. He played with his toys, but he much preferred books. His parents were proud of his home-grown learning, but they were most pleased to have the school take him off their hands, at least intellectually, for several hours each day.

In many situations, schools are not really prepared to meet the needs of a child who comes to class with an extensive educational background. Children are passed from grade level to grade level en masse. The first-grade

teacher teaches first-grade things, the second-grade teacher teaches second-grade things, and so on. While each teacher in the continuum may sometimes be annoyed that the children's teacher from the year before didn't teach them more, he or she may be equally annoyed if the previous year's teacher has taught the students too much! The second-grade teacher may not want the first-grade teacher to allow any students to begin reading the second-grade reading book while they are still only in first-grade. It is considered acceptable for teachers at one grade level to use materials from an earlier grade with slower students. It is not, however, generally considered acceptable for teachers of one grade to allow their faster learners to begin using books and materials from the next grade.

Since teachers are usually limited to learning resources intended for their own or earlier grades, students like Russell can easily become bored. Such students can quickly advance through the books for their own grade, but they cannot be allowed to advance any further. This means that their teachers have to seek out learning materials for these students that will keep them interested. This is no easy task, since there are so many subject areas to teach in a day and so many other children to be taught. Sometimes the Russell's in our schools are kept challenged by the learning they are offered, more often they are not. In either case, keeping abreast of their needs is a constant test of their teachers' creativity and ingenuity.

Ms. X felt the pressure from Russell constantly. She had noticed in the first weeks of school that Russell already possessed a moderately sized sight vocabulary. She had observed that Russell would read parts of some of the storybooks at the book table aloud to himself. She found Russell's reading skill both fascinating and scary. Fascinating, because she had never before had a kindergarten child in her class who could read. Scary, because she did not know what she would do with him. Her past years as a kindergarten teacher had always been spent getting children ready for first-grade. What was she to do with a child who already had the knowledge she would spend all year getting all the other children ready to know?

Russell began work at the two-sound level in October. By early November, Ms. X had introduced him to the three-sound activities. December had been as filled with Christmas for Russell as it had been for Denise, so Russell did not start work with the phrases until January. By February, he was using the Decoding Chart to begin the process of transitioning out of the program.

Russell enjoyed all of the levels of the program, but he found the transition and decoding activities particularly fascinating. The reading vocabulary with which he had come to kindergarten had consisted of words he had memorized. The transition-level activities allowed him to translate what he had learned about reading sounds into reading letters as well.

By the end of February, Russell had finished all of the activities that were to occupy Denise for the entire year. He had completed all of these activities while continuing to work in the same group with Denise, Anthony, and the three other workmates with whom he shared his learning experiences.

Although Russell had long since moved ahead of Denise and the rest of the group in the activities he experienced each day, he often found himself in the role of helper for others in his group who might need to know a word or a procedure. Even though he was far advanced in the activities he used, he was still occasionally in need of Denise's help as well. Denise was the group's expert on all forty-four sounds, and Russell would occasionally forget things like which sound it was that you got by putting a bee on a frog's head.

Around the beginning of March, Ms. X decided that she was ready to see what the final level of the Reading Program was like. She wasn't really ready in the sense that she was actively looking forward to taking this next step. She was only ready because she could see that Russell was ready, and she knew there were a few more students who were equally ready to join him in any new activities she might present.

Ms. X had taught reading readiness activities in her kindergarten classes before, but she had never before actually taught anyone to read. The readiness activities had always stopped comfortably short of actually requiring her students to read words. She wasn't really sure how one went about teaching reading. She also wasn't even sure if it was right to teach kindergarten children to read anyway.

Ms. X hadn't worried about any of these things when she introduced this program to her class, because she had not believed any of her students would progress that far. However, even though Ms. X wasn't too excited about allowing Russell and the others at his level to start this last level of the program, at least she didn't feel guilty about pushing them into moving ahead too quickly. If anything, they were pushing her.

The first activity Ms. X taught Russell to use at this most advanced level was the Vowels-Only Cards, that went along with the Picture Packets he had already used at each of the previous levels. The only difference in the activity at this level was that Russell would read words written in traditional letters that had tiny sound-pictures above the vowels.

While Russell was learning to use the Vowels-Only Word Cards and Picture Packets, Ms. X kept all his other learning station activities at the transition level. There were no vowels-only worksheets or stamping activities to give to Russell. Those activities were to be replaced by creative writing experiences. And, Ms. X wanted to delay the introduction of creative writing until she had seen how well Russell could do the Vowels-Only Word Cards and Picture Packets.

At the same time as Russell began the Vowels-Only Cards, Ms. X began the process of using her own set of small stamps to convert some of the class's library books to vowels-only books. Although this was a slow process, Ms. X could console herself with the reassuring notion that each book she did this year she would not have to do again next year. Because she didn't want to incur the wrath of the school librarian, Ms. X only stamped her own personal collection of books. She had known for a long time that she would eventually have to make some vowels-only books, however, being much like the rest of us, she procrastinated until Russell's need for reading material finally forced her to

start stamping. At least if she had a Russell next year, this year's books would already be ready for him.

When Russell had shown that he could read the Vowels-Only Cards, Ms. X decided to begin creative writing. One day in March, Ms. X formed Russell and the other students who were also at the vowels-only level into their own special group, so she could give them a new assignment. She gave them each an individual chalkboard and some chalk and told them they were now going to write their own words and then illustrate them.

Before this point in time, Ms. X had prepared a spelling notebook for each member of this group, so that they might ask her for any words that they could not collectively figure out how to spell.

Ms. X told Russell and each member of the group that they were to write something down on their chalkboards that they would also like to draw a picture about. This something could be anything they wanted. They could write about something that happened at home, or at school, or on vacation. They could write something that was true, or that they had dreamed, or that they made up out of their own imagination. If anyone couldn't think of anything to write about, he or she could ask Ms. X for suggestions.

Whatever each person wrote, he or she was to write on his or her individual chalkboard. When each person was finished writing, he or she was to bring the chalkboard to Ms. X so she could check the spelling. When all of the spelling was correct, the person was to copy what he or she had written onto a piece of lined paper, using his or her best handwriting. When the writing was finished, the author would get a piece of drawing paper and make an illustration to go along with what had been written.

Ms. X explained the process to Russell and the others, and then she crossed her fingers and hoped for the best. She had never asked a kindergarten child to write a story before. She had used experience stories, but they had always involved the whole class, and she had always done all of the writing. Did Russell really know enough to be able to sit down and write his own story, even if the story were only a phrase or two long? How much of her own time would now have to be spent helping Russell get words down on his chalkboard? He had always been relatively independent of her as he had passed through the other activities. What would happen to this independence now? Ms. X had all of these questions and doubts and many more, but the only way to discover what would happen was to begin the creative writing. So, Russell and the others were given their chalkboards and allowed to embark on a new set of experiences.

Actually, Russell and the others in the group had already learned to write quite a few words before they reached this point in the program. They had learned to write and, for the most part, spell correctly the one hundred fifty-six words in the Sight Word Worksheets. They also had practice in writing and spelling the assortment of words that appeared over and over again on the various levels of the transition level worksheets. They had spent considerable time writing the words for the Blue and White levels of the Tiny Writing Cards. And, if anyone needed a word he or she was simply unable to spell at all, he or

she could always bring his or her spelling notebook to Ms. X, so that she might write the word for them. As the children in this group began their own writing, they would not be short on words.

Although Russell had learned how to write many words, the words he knew were not as important as a skill he had acquired from using the program. Even if a word was not one of the sight words he had learned to write and even if he could not remember how to write one of the words from a worksheet, he had learned how to say a word, either silently to himself or aloud, and listen for its sounds. This is exactly what he had been doing since early October, as he had been free-stamping words and phrases at the Stamping Station.

As Russell heard each sound in a word, he had only to look at his Decoding Chart to see how that sound was spelled. If a sound had more than one spelling, he could simply ask Ms. X which spelling to use. With his ability to hear the sounds in a word, he could write down any word he wanted, even words he hadn't been taught, simply by saying the word and listening very carefully to the sounds it made. He had been listening to words and stamping out their sounds since he first began work at the two-sound level. This listening skill would now enable him to write anything he wanted. He had been learning a skill. Now he had a skill to use for learning.

Russell began writing. When he asked Ms. X how to spell a word, she told him to sound it out. She told him to look at his Decoding Chart to see how the sounds were spelled. When Russell didn't know which sound spelling to use for a particular sound, Ms. X told him the number or the color for the spelling to use. Russell never brought his spelling notebook to Ms. X while he was writing, because he did not know which words he wasn't spelling correctly. He could hear the sounds, or at least most of them, in any word he wanted to write, and he could use his Decoding Chart to find a spelling for any sound he could hear. He could write anything he wanted, and his writing didn't take up very much of Ms. X's time at all.

The time Ms. X needed to devote to Russell came only when Russell had finished writing his story on his chalkboard. He brought what he had written to Ms. X so she could check his spelling. Ms. X also had Russell bring her his spelling notebook. Each time she found a word he had not spelled correctly, she underlined it on his chalkboard and wrote it in his spelling notebook. She then asked him to make all the corrections on his chalkboard and bring it to her again when he was done. When all the words were spelled correctly, Ms. X then had Russell copy his writing onto lined paper and make an illustration to match what he had written.

It had taken more of Ms. X's time to help Russell at this level than at any of the previous levels at which he had worked, but it hadn't taken nearly as much time as she had feared it might. Russell needed very little help when he was actually writing, because he was usually unaware that he hadn't heard all the sounds in a word, or that he had used the wrong spelling. Occasionally, he would ask Ms. X what numbered spelling he should use in a particular word, but those questions demanded very little of her time. The only time she had to devote to Russell was when he had finished writing on his chalkboard and

needed her to verify his spellings. She soon found that it worked out better if she had Russell start his drawing before she checked his chalkboard, so he would not be kept waiting if she was busy helping other children in class.

As Russell became better at writing and as his spelling notebook began to contain more of the words he had difficulty sounding out or spelling correctly, his chalkboard contained fewer and fewer words that needed correcting. Since Russell's writing was demanding less of her time, Ms. X gradually allowed him to stop work on the transition level worksheets and the Sight Word Worksheets and devote that time to writing and illustrating whatever he wanted.

With more time available for writing, Russell's stories grew longer. His illustrations also began to be related to one another. He would tell a story that started on one chalkboard and extended through several more. He would sometimes write two or three or more pages, one chalkboard at a time, and wait until all the pages had been written before illustrating them.

Ms. X would staple Russell's writings and illustrations together to form books that she would then convert to vowels-only reading material and place at the learning station that had always been reserved for books. Russell did not need his own writing converted to vowels-only for himself. He had written and rewritten every word of it, so he always knew what it said. However, others who wanted to read what he had written needed this assistance.

As the other students with Russell at the vowels-only level became more confident in their own abilities, there were more children who could be asked what spelling to use to write a sound, or what sounds were used to make a word. Ms. X was always the one who checked the chalkboards before the final writing could be transferred to paper, but she was now only the last person to check the boards, not the first. Ms. X began encouraging each person at the vowels-only level to have another person at that same level read what had been written on the chalkboard before it was brought to her for final approval.

Instead of finding it harder to check everyone's work as more people reached the vowels-only level, Ms. X found it was growing easier. Her students were helping each other to write. They read to each other what they were writing and listened in turn to what was being written by others. Those of her kindergartners who had reached the vowels-only level had made it this far because they had helped each other. It was quite evident to Ms. X that the more she encouraged them to help one another, the more they all learned.

This was kindergarten, and Ms. X had children who could read and write. Reading and writing had not been her goal for them. It hadn't even been their goal for themselves. It had happened because it had been allowed to happen. Not all of her children could read like Russell, but she didn't care. Denise couldn't read like Russell, but Denise could read, and she enjoyed the reading that she did. Anthony could read, too, even if it wasn't the same kind of reading that Denise could do. All of her students had learned because all of her students had helped each other learn. Some learned more. Some learned less. That wasn't important. It was important only that all had learned. None of us is as smart as all of us, and that's a good thing for all of us to know.