

## November

By the beginning of November, Ms. X had finished *Dekodiphukan* and the introduction of all the sounds. She had also introduced almost all of her students to at least the triangle level of activities. A few of her students were still working with a restricted number of sounds. But even more students had already begun work with the circle, square, rectangle, and star levels.

Ms. X found it was important for her to know which children were working at which level when she came around to each group. To help her keep track of the working levels for each child, she stapled a folded-over piece of tagboard to the yarn necklaces. As each student moved to a different level she added the appropriate geometric shape next to the old symbol on that child's piece of tagboard. She quickly abandoned that system, however, when she overheard two of her students discussing who had more symbols on their cards. Ms. X did not want her record-keeping system to turn into a status race for her students. Learning to read wasn't a competition.

The second system Ms. X devised used the same concept of a folded and stapled tag as her first method. This time, however, only one geometric shape at a time appeared on the tag. If a student were at the triangle level, a triangle appeared on the tag. If a student advanced to the circle level, then a gummed label with a circle on it was placed over the previous triangle coding. Each time a child advanced to a higher level, the previous coding on the tag was covered up with the gummed label for the new coding.

Ms. X made sure that she placed no particular emphasis on a child's moving from one level to another. She was pleased, of course, when a child made progress, and she complimented the child on the advances made. But no praise was offered for the whole class to hear. She was pleased, for example, when Russell advanced from two sounds to three, and she told him so. She was also pleased when Anthony advanced from working with five sounds to working with eight, and she told him so with the same amount of pride as she had shown Russell. The praise Ms. X shared with the whole class was earned either by students who were working very hard at learning or by students who were helping others to learn. The status in Ms. X's classroom came not from how fast you ran across the field, but from how hard you worked at getting there, and from how many people you helped along the way.

Ms. X wasn't sure, yet, how to go about introducing some students to the three-sound level, while keeping other students at the same learning station at the two-sound level. She didn't want the people that she felt were ready to begin trying three-sound words to be pulled away from their groups, because that would defeat the whole purpose of the heterogeneous groupings.

As more and more students like Russell showed clear evidence that they were ready to move on to three-sound blending, Ms. X felt increasing pressure to introduce that next level of activities. Ms. X had assessed Russell and a few others at the three-sound level after she had begun using the Three-Sound Flipbook for whole-class lessons. The assessment results provided ample evidence to support the introduction of the Three-Sound Word Cards and

Picture Packets. However, ample evidence was not synonymous with ample confidence. Ms. X wasn't exactly sure how this next level would work out, and she was reluctant to find out. Nevertheless, the pressure from Russell won out, and Ms. X introduced the Three-Sound Picture Packets in early November.

Once she decided to do so, Ms. X found that introducing the Three-Sound Picture Packets was much easier than introducing the Two-Sound Picture Packets had been. The procedures her students had already learned for the Two-Sound Picture Packets were exactly the same as for the three-sound activities. The only difference was that the words to be read now were made up of three sounds and not two.

Ms. X was quite surprised at how easy it was to introduce a handful of students to the three-sound activities while the rest of the class kept busy with the two-sound materials. To accomplish this introduction, Ms. X took up a position near the Picture Packet Station. As each group rotated through the station, she pulled out the few students from that group she felt were ready to start work with three sounds and introduced them to the new materials. Once the use of the materials was clear to the students, these students then returned to their regular work routine. The introduction of new materials only increased the number of activities from which these few students might choose. Nothing else had changed.

Ms. X spent one day at each of the different learning stations, introducing these same students first to Three-Sound Picture Packets, then to Three-Sound Worksheets, then to Three-Sound Stamping, and finally, to Three-Sound and Phrase Books.

### **Handwriting Station**

Shortly after Ms. X had finished reading *Dekodiphukan* and introducing all forty-four sounds to her students, she began introducing the Alphabet Wall Cards. As soon as her students had enough whole-class practice in drawing the letter shapes, Ms. X replaced the Workjobs learning station with the first of the handwriting activities.

When Ms. X placed the handwriting activities at the learning center previously occupied by the Workjobs, she did not abandon use of the Workjobs. Instead, she made Workjobs one of the tasks available to the students at the Picture Packet Station. Anthony, for example, could work on his own modified set of Picture Packets for a while and then complete his time at the 1 Picture Packet Station by choosing from among the available Workjobs. Occasionally, Ms. X also made the Workjobs an option for students like Anthony at the Picture Packet Station, as well.

### **Three-Sound Materials**

After Ms. X had shown selected students how to use the various three-sound materials, she relabeled the tagboard cards attached to these students' yarn necklaces with the geometric shape to indicate the level at which these students were now working. Ms. X didn't make a public ceremony out of the relabeling. She simply waited until after school and placed a gummed label

containing the new coding over the coding already present. The change in status was meant to be very low-key. Some people's yarn necklace tags might have different labels on them from one day to the next, but everybody was still in the same learning group.

Although Ms. X had presented three-sound activities to a select number of students, she told these students that they were still free to use two-sound activities or to alternate between two and three-sound activities if they wished. She did require, though, that they attempt at least one of the three-sound activities at each learning station each day.

The first students Ms. X had selected to learn about three-sound blending needed no minimum established for how many three-sound activities they should attempt. The fact that they were so quickly ready to begin three-sound blending was a clear indication that they would have no trouble devoting all of their attention to the three-sound level. Later in the year, however, Ms. X would find that there were students for whom learning had not come as easily. These students would need both the security of being able to continue working on activities with which they had already experienced success, and the push to attempt something new, which was the purpose of requiring students to attempt at least one new activity per station per day.

Ms. X found there were three main advantages to allowing the students who were using three-sound materials to work alongside students who were still devoting their learning time to the more familiar two-sound materials. First, many of the three-sound and subsequently even more advanced activities shared the same basic materials used at earlier levels. All levels of the Picture Packet activities used the same basic set of thirty-eight packets of illustrations. Three-Sound Worksheets used the same marking pens and cloths, and the stamping activities all required access to the same sets of stamps. Logistically, then, working at the same station allowed all students convenient access to the materials their levels shared in common.

Second, Ms. X found that as additional students became ready to begin work with three-sound materials, it was increasingly easier to introduce these students to this next level of activity. Not only had they already seen the activities in use, but they now had others in their same group who could tell them exactly what needed to be done. As a practical matter, this meant that Ms. X did not have to contemplate meeting separately with thirty or so different students to teach each new activity at each station. She could devote her attention instead to both assessing where her students were and teaching them what they needed to know to be able to move on.

It should be noted that, although Ms. X came to feel quite comfortable using the children in each group to teach others in their same group the procedures for each new activity, this use of students as teachers did not extend to relying on them to teach each other the techniques for blending sounds into words. Students might, of course, help each other with these skills, but Ms. X made sure that she herself provided each student who needed it her own special assistance in this crucial area of learning to read.

The third benefit Ms. X found in keeping all of the levels of learning

together at the same station was the continued availability of the more advanced learners to assist the medium and slower learners. Removing the advanced learners from the group as they began using the higher levels of materials would have meant the absence of both a prime source of information and the best models for learning that the medium and slower learners could possibly have available to them.

Ms. X had been told that the Reading Program had been designed to provide as much consistency as possible between its various levels. She could now see that, at least as far as she had progressed in the program as of mid November, once her students understood the initial operation of the five learning stations, they understood the basic structure in which they would be working all year long, regardless of the level to which they found themselves assigned. Changes in levels of activity were accomplished within the framework of an already known, already secure routine of learning. This was an important element in letting her students feel comfortable when leaving the security of one level of achievement for the next.

### **The November Assessment**

In the middle of November, Ms. X conducted the first of the full class assessments that had been suggested to her in the Teacher's Manual. These periodic assessments were to give her some benchmark for measuring her class's collective progress. Ms. X used the assessment sheet from the Blackline Masters.

The instructions in the Manual suggested that Ms. X should fill out the assessment sheet as completely as she was able from memory, based upon her own personal knowledge of her students. The sheet's requirement that Ms. X attempt to fill it in from memory had as its purpose causing her to have to think about each of her students, one at a time, and then think about how that child was doing.

Ms. X was surprised to find that she really couldn't say how well or how poorly some of her students were actually doing. She knew the level at which they were working, but she hadn't paid that much attention recently to how well they were doing at their level. She knew her next responsibility as part of the assessment was to spend part of the next day or two working with these particular children to bring herself up-to-date on their progress.

Even though Ms. X was a little surprised at the handful of children for whom she could not make an accurate assessment from memory alone, she was, nevertheless, impressed with how many of her children she felt quite well informed. The results of Ms. X's November assessment can be seen in the Chapter 3 Class Assessment Sheets, page 95.

### **The Learning Station Routine**

Over the weeks, Ms. X had settled into a routine during the learning station time that she had come to feel comfortable with. She had evolved four different plans for allocating her time during the period, and her only major decision at the start of the period was which of her plans to follow for that day.

Ms. X's first plan was to pick one of the groups that rotated through the learning stations and follow that group through each of its rotations for the whole period. She might, for example, choose the green group and sit in with this group while it worked first at the Picture Packet Station, then the Picture Packet Station, then the Stamping Station, and so on.

Accompanying a single group from station to station for an entire period enabled Ms. X to come to know quite well both the skills and the needs of each of the members of the group. It was as if she had a classroom of only six children for that period, since all the other groups could operate without any assistance from her at all.

Even though she might choose to follow one group around for the whole period, not all the group's members placed equal demands on the time Ms. X had to devote to them. Usually, students like Russell operated in the same manner whether Ms. X was with the group or not. Students like Denise, on the other hand, enjoyed reading their completed work to Ms. X and occasionally benefited from her suggestions on how to do something in a manner that was more efficient or productive. Students like Anthony, though, usually occupied most of the time Ms. X spent with the group, since everyone else in the group was already functioning quite nicely without her help.

If Ms. X elected to follow one group around for a whole period, she felt obligated to plan her schedule so that she was able to do this for each group in turn. She would sometimes follow a different group each day for five days, until all of the groups had enjoyed the pleasure of her company.

Ms. X's second plan for allocating her time during the learning station period was to assign herself to a particular learning station and remain at the selected station for the entire period. Under this plan, Ms. X had the opportunity to work with all of the groups in a single period, since each group rotated through every station every day. This was an excellent way to assess how each of the groups compared with one another in terms of working together as units. Working with each group helped Ms. X know how well or how poorly the decisions she had made about the compositions of the groups were working out.

The third instructional plan employed by Ms. X involved working with specific students either individually or in small groups. Ms. X might, for example, decide to work with two or three students on the process of blending two sounds into words. She might decide to have these selected students come to her own special work area and, with her guidance, go over the words of the Two-Sound Flipbook. Working with individual or selected groups of students was also the manner in which Ms. X would both assess each student's readiness for a new level of activities and teach the child or children the necessary skills for beginning the new level.

The fourth plan of instruction that Ms. X employed was simply to wander around the room, stopping anywhere she chose, to provide assistance to whomever she felt needed her help at that moment.

By early November, Ms. X had settled on a rotation pattern that allowed her students fifteen minutes a day at each station. These fifteen-minute

periods also included time for cleaning up and moving on to the next station. This meant that her students really only spent about twelve minutes at each station, actually working on the activities. The five periods of fifteen minutes each, when added to the extra fifteen or twenty minutes that Ms. X divided between reading her class a story and conducting a whole-class lesson, meant her class spent about an hour and a half on reading on most days. Ms. X felt this was quite enough time for kindergartners. If she were teaching first-grade, she would most likely have had her students work at each station for twenty minutes, because first-graders have longer attention spans. She did not want her kindergarten students to grow restless during reading time, so she preferred to keep the periods between rotations very short.

Ms. X used the regular periods of rotation to help her students learn about telling time. Beneath the room clock, at a height where she could easily reach it, Ms. X placed a clock face made from tagboard. This clock face had movable hands that Ms. X could quickly adjust to any time she wished. Beneath the clock face, she placed a small chalkboard.



Ms. X usually began the reading stations at 9:15, which meant the first rotation was at 9:30. When the groups were ready to begin work, she set the clock hands to 9:30 and wrote 9:30 on the chalkboard. She would tell her students they were to work until 9:30. At 9:30, they were all to stop, clean up, and get ready to rotate. They would know when it was 9:30 because the hands on the classroom clock would match the hands on the clock Ms. X had made. Each time the groups rotated and began work again, she would reset the clock to the next time for rotation.

The tagboard clock and its accompanying chalkboard accomplished several purposes. First, it helped her students begin to associate specific times with specific positions of the hands on the clock. Second, it helped them gain an informal feeling for lengths of time. Third, it provided Ms. X with reminders of when it was time for the groups to rotate, because everyone could now tell when the time had arrived. This wasn't because everyone spent the whole fifteen minutes looking at the clock. It was because there were now thirty or so students who could, along with Ms. X, glance at the clock every once in a while to check the time. Fourth, it provided Ms. X with a useful way of indicating the arrival of all kinds of other times during the day. She could indicate the time

school started or ended, or when recess was to begin, or when the class was to go to an assembly, or whatever else was to happen at some specific time on any given day. The clock gave her students experience with the concept of time and the related process of telling time. The children liked the time-telling clock. Ms. X did, too.

Although Ms. X's usual period of time for the groups to spend at each learning station was fifteen minutes, she could always shorten that time as needed. If, for example, a school assembly was to take half an hour of the time available for reading, Ms. X might decide to tell her class they were only to have ten minutes at each station that day. Ms. X would, of course, adjust the times on the tagboard clock accordingly.

It was Ms. X's usual practice to shorten the amount of time spent at each station and still rotate her students through all five stations, but occasionally she chose another alternative. If there were too little time available for reading to provide any meaningful time for a five-station rotation, Ms. X could arbitrarily decide to allow her students to rotate through only one or two stations before cleaning up for the day.

### **A New Student in Class**

Ms. X's class had settled comfortably into the routine of the program, and on a day-to-day basis, things were progressing quite nicely. But at the end of November, Ms. X experienced an event common in teaching that she had never learned to accept with equanimity. This event was the enrollment of a new student in her class.

The new student's name was Marisol. It wasn't that Marisol was an awful child. He really was nice enough. The problem was simply that he was new. Being new meant he didn't know any of the things the other children had just spent three months learning. Ms. X knew it was important to make a new child feel welcome in an unfamiliar school environment, so she always made a special effort to include the new child as a part of the class. Special effort or not, though, Ms. X disliked having anyone transfer into her room anytime past the first week of school. She wished it were illegal for parents to move their children from one school to another except in June, July, or August.

It had taken Ms. X about a month to read *Dekodiphukan* to her class and teach most of her students the forty-four sounds. How was she going to find the time to catch Marisol up on all that everyone else had learned so far? To her surprise, Ms. X found it was not as difficult as she had feared. To begin with, Ms. X sat Marisol down at a cassette recorder and had him listen to the tapes that accompanied the Sound Review Flipbooks. Ms. X had used these tapes with Anthony to help him review sounds. However, the specific purpose of the tapes and Flipbooks was to teach the sounds to students who joined the class after the teacher had completed the reading of *Dekodiphukan*.

Ms. X had Marisol listen to each of the five tapes one time through, and then she concentrated his attention on the tape and the flipbook for the triangle level sounds. He spent one whole reading period listening to the tapes and amusing himself at the book station.

On his second day in class, Ms. X assigned Marisol to the learning group of which Russell, Denise, and Anthony were members. For that reading period, she followed Marisol's group through each learning station, and alternated between teaching him the procedures for the station and reviewing with him the first eight sounds. The next day, she let him rotate through the stations with his newly assigned group, without any assistance from her. The only exception made for Marisol in the standard rotation was that, in place of spending time at the Picture Packet Station, Marisol was routed to the tapes and Flipbooks instead.

By the beginning of January, Marisol had already learned all of the sounds and had passed Anthony in his ability to blend sounds into words. By the time of the whole-class assessment in February, Marisol ranked as a strong beginner in two-sound blending. By April, Marisol had reached the three-sound plateau.

Ms. X was pleased that Marisol had mastered the sounds so quickly. She wondered, though, why his progress had been so fast when so much more time had been spent teaching the rest of her students the sounds. Marisol was not a fast learner like Russell. In fact, Ms. X would have ranked Marisol as between Anthony and Denise in ability, and just a touch closer to Anthony than to Denise. Why then, she wondered, had Marisol learned the sounds so much faster with just the Sound Review Flipbooks and cassette tapes than students of similar ability who had gone through hearing *Dekodiphukan* and reviewing the sounds every day with their teacher?

The introduction of a few more new students to her classroom over the following months allowed Ms. X a better opportunity to observe the process of learning that had taken place for Marisol. Marisol had not learned the forty-four sounds so quickly just because they had been condensed onto a set of Flipbooks. The Sound Review Flipbooks were handy, but they were not the main source of his learning. His primary source for learning the sounds with so much ease had been the room full of teachers with whom he was surrounded. These surrounding teachers were his classmates.

When Marisol joined the class in late November, most students already knew all of the sounds. Marisol was quite literally surrounded by people who could tell him how to say any sound to go along with any sound-picture to which he might point. With this many helpers available to him, how could he possibly avoid learning quickly? In January, when Carmina joined the class, Ms. X no longer feared that new arrivals would not be able to comprehend the new Reading Program. Marisol had caught on quickly. Carmina would catch on quickly, too.