February - and a Little Before

Phrase Level

In January, Russell and the students advancing along with him had begun to convince Ms. X that they were becoming too good at three-sound blending. Ms. X had been hoping the three-sound activities would occupy them for a few months longer. She was not as anxious as they were to see what lay ahead in the Reading Program. Next year, when she had already been through the program once, she would feel no hesitation about letting a student move on, but that was next year. Now, however, Ms. X wished she could somehow put on the brakes. She was not completely comfortable about teaching a Reading Program to students who naturally assumed she knew everything about it, when she herself felt she was only a day or two ahead of them. Nevertheless, they were ready to move on, so she knew she would have to make herself ready, too. There was no way around it, the phrase level would have to be introduced next.

The first introduction Russell and the other faster learners had to the phrase level was at the Picture Packet Station. Actually, their first introduction had already taken place even before Ms. X had conducted her assessment. When the three-sound activities had been placed at the learning stations, the Book station had Three-Sound and Phrase Books added to it. The Picture Packet Station would be Russell and his friends' second contact with phrases and Ms. X's first real opportunity to see if they could actually read the phrases.

Ms. X decided to form a temporary group out of all the children she had determined were ready to learn about phrases, so she could make them all the same special presentation. She preferred not to use the option of sitting at one particular station and explaining phrases to the selected students as their learning groups rotated through. If she sat at one station, she would have to repeat the same lesson five times. Forming all of the selected students into their own temporary group meant Ms. X could spend much longer working with them on the new techniques she wished to impart.

After Ms. X gave Russell and his peers their lesson on how to read phrases, each person returned to his or her regular group. Ms. X then placed herself at the Picture Packet Station to teach each group, as it rotated through, how to handle the logistical problem the introduction of the phrase level had brought with it.

As the students had read the Two and then Three-Sound Word Cards there had been no problems associated with matching the Word Cards to the Picture Packets. The plain Yellow Triangle Word Cards went with the plain Yellow Triangle Picture Packet. The Happy Face red rectangle Word Cards went with the Happy Face Red Rectangle Picture Packet. At the phrase level, however, this matching of cards to packets presented a potential problem. The phrases marked with the plain yellow triangle went with the same set of Picture Packets as did the Two-Sound Word Cards with the plain yellow triangle. Not only did the phrases and the Two-Sound Word Cards go with the same set of pictures, but so, eventually, would the Transition Sentence Cards and the Vowels-Only Cards as well. (See page 19).

Ms. X's role at the Picture Packet Station was to teach each learning group a revised procedure for issuing themselves the packets. Whereas heretofore it had made no difference if a student selected a set of cards and then collected the matching packet, or reversed the order and selected the packet, then the cards, now the order of choice had to be dictated. Ms. X taught her students to select a Picture Packet first and then get the matching Word Cards or Phrase Cards. The Picture Packet selected first meant there would be no problem with children selecting a set of words or phrases that went with that packet, only to find the matching Picture Packet missing.

Ms. X had feared her students would find the double use of the Picture Packets troublesome and confusing, but they didn't seem to care one way or the other. They quickly adapted to having to select the Picture Packet before doing anything else. Apart from having to specify the choosing of Picture Packets first, the station continued to run exactly as it had when the students had only been working at the two and three-sound levels.

It was even easier to add the phrase level to the Worksheet Station than it had been to the Picture Packet Station. The phrase level of activities had its own separate set of worksheets, so all Ms. X had to do was make the Phrase Worksheets available. Everything else remained unchanged.

The stamping materials for the phrase level of activities were, visually at least, different from the materials already in use at that station. All of the stamping activities for the two and three-sound levels had been in worksheet format. Now, however, Tiny Writing Cards were to be used. Fortunately for Ms. X's peace of mind, use of the Tiny Writing Cards turned out to be already familiar to her students. One of the homework activities involved drawing pictures to go above the words stamped out on a sheet. All of the students to whom Ms. X was now assigning use of the Tiny Writing Cards had completed this activity quite often. The Tiny Writing Cards, in effect, were the homework worksheets cut up, with just one illustration per sheet instead of four.

Ms. X's students had been exposed to Phrase Books since the introduction of the three-sound level of materials. Now that the phrase level of activities had been introduced, Ms. X added the Transition Level Books to the Book Station. As usual, any student could read, or at least thumb through, any book at the station. Ms. X was not concerned by the addition of the Transition Level Books to the station because no specific learning was supposed to take place at that station anyway. In addition, the words in the Transition Level Books were written in both sound-pictures and traditional letters. The words written in sound-pictures were, in essence, phrases just like the ones she was already asking her students at the phrase level to read. The Transition Books, in effect, were just more practice with phrases.

Ms. X completed the introduction of the phrase level of materials at four learning stations, and the fear she had felt in anticipation of making this change diminished and then disappeared. The fifth learning station, Handwriting, went on as before. Once the students Ms. X had selected to begin work at the phrase level had adapted to the use of their new materials, she changed her whole-class lessons to match this higher level of accomplishment.

Ms. X ended her lessons with the Three-Sound Flipbook and began to involve her class in writing, or at least stamping out, experience stories.

Ms. X had used experience stories in earlier years to introduce her kindergarten students to reading. She knew that students who participated with her in the writing of such stories had developed a much better understanding of what reading and writing were all about. In earlier years, some of her more able students had actually learned to read a few words from the vocabulary they had gained through these class stories. She had not had any slower learners learn to read from these stories, but she was convinced that these same slower learners had at least gained a very important grasp of the connection between speaking, reading and writing from participating with the rest of the class in creating the stories.

The specific techniques Ms. X used to involve her students in creating experience stories are described in Chapter 5. The two important elements of the experience stories to note here are:

1. The stories themselves were stamped out as opposed to written out. That is, the stories were composed of words written with sounds as opposed to words written in traditional letters, as would have been Ms. X's practice in earlier years.
2. Even though only a few students were ready to read longer words or phrases, the activity was one in which the entire class was involved.

The two-sound then three-sound then phrase approach has helped, and will continue to help, countless children to make sense of the process of reading when they had little hope of making sense of it before. However, experience stories enable children, both slow and fast, to grasp an understanding of what reading itself is about.

We read and we write to share the experiences of our culture, past and present. Experience stories allow our students to participate in this recording of experiences to be shared. This sharing takes place even when not every student in the group can read every one of the words recorded for the class. It is necessary to view a picture of the whole puzzle if the pieces of the puzzle are to be understood. Experience stories provide children this picture.

Transition Level

It took Russell, and the few other students advancing through the program at his same rate, only the month of January to pass through the phrase level of the program. Ms. X had been nervous about introducing the phrase-level activities to her students because she wasn't sure how either she or the learning groups would be able to handle three different levels of activity at the learning stations all at the same time. The successful introduction of the phrase materials had made Ms. X feel confident that she could feel comfortable about introducing the next higher level of material when her students became ready to move on. When that time arrived, however, she found that she was actually less confident about exposing her students to the transition level of materials than she had been about the phrase level.

The concern Ms. X had about the transition level of activities was that this level of materials required her students to write letters. There were two problems with writing letters. The first was that Ms. X had never really paid too much attention to the Handwriting Station. She had set out the appropriate activities and taught each of the learning groups how to use them, but she had never spent much time at this particular station checking up on what was being learned. Handwriting wasn't on any of her assessment sheets, and she had never given it a high priority. After all, she hadn't expected her students to learn much more about writing than how to print their names. She had anticipated that perhaps a few of her faster learners might reach the transition level by the end of the school year, but this was February! Her students were moving too fast. She wasn't prepared for any of them to be ready for the transition level yet.

The second problem was, how would the students in each group feel when some people were writing letters while everyone else was still only using the stamps for writing? Each of the other levels Ms. X had introduced to the learning groups had involved essentially the same kinds of activity already in use at the stations. Whether a student was reading two-sound words or three-sound words or phrases, the words read were composed of sound-pictures. The only difference between the levels was in how many sounds each child was asked to read. Now, however, a select number of students would be doing something completely different. These few students would be writing out words in a form that was clearly recognizable as the way everybody in the rest of the world did it. Would the introduction of traditional letters and traditional writing make everyone at the earlier levels of the program resent the fact that they were still using the sound pictures and the stamps?

Ms. X could deal with the problem of handwriting technique by devoting more of her time to the handwriting station before she introduced the first of the transition activities. As for the problem of how well the learning groups would accept this newest level of activity, Ms. X could only wait and see. Next year, Ms. X would be an expert on everything, but this year she would just have to deal with each new uncertainty as it arose. She was not anxious to begin the transition level, but she would not hold her children back from the adventure.

Ms. X decided that it wasn't too important for her students to have great handwriting before they began the transition activities. Even the students who reversed letters or hadn't yet caught on to the subtle differences between an 'h' and an 'n' could at least begin the activities if they were ready in all other respects. The problems individual students might have with handwriting would be more easily corrected, or at least diminished, if they actually had something to write about.

The first transition level material to which Ms. X introduced her students were the Decoding Chart Practice Worksheets that she introduced at the Handwriting Station. (See page 43)

Once the Practice Worksheets had been introduced and made a part of the Handwriting Station activities, Ms. X was ready to add the Transition

Sentence Cards to the materials available at the Picture Packet Station. The cards themselves contained phrases that were both fully stamped out and fully written out. Since they were fully stamped, they were, in essence, only another set of phrase cards for her faster learners to read. The letters beneath the sound-pictures were a nice addition, but Ms. X didn't really see what purpose they would serve. Why would any of her students bother to read the letters when the sounds were so handy, and so much easier for her students to read?

As Ms. X's students first began using the Transition Sentence Cards, her question seemed valid. Each of the students read the new cards exactly as if the cards were only a fancier version of the phrase cards they were already used to reading. This way of reading the cards was soon altered, but not before the students had become more completely immersed in the activities available to them at the transition level. For now, however, the fact that these new cards were so much like the phrase cards that had preceded them meant Ms. X had no trouble at all in presenting them to her students. Their use involved no new skills. Ms. X simply directed the selected students to choose their Picture Packet assignments from these new cards instead of the old.

The Worksheet Station wasn't quite as easy to change from one level to the next. There were no special transition level worksheets to simply add to the existing pile of materials. The transition materials at the worksheet station consisted of all of the worksheets her students were already using.

Ms. X used the triangle level two-sound worksheets to illustrate for her transition level students how to use the Decoding Chart for letter writing and word writing on the worksheets. Since the worksheets at the two-sound level were coded by the sounds they used, the triangle level worksheets only required the students to look at the first row of the Decoding Chart for the necessary spellings. Each successive coding of worksheets only added one additional row of the Decoding Chart as the source for the spellings. Ms. X's faster learners always seemed to catch on to everything quickly. Writing letters on the worksheets from the Decoding Chart was no exception. No one had any trouble at all understanding how to write words on the worksheets.

Just as Ms. X had not seen the purpose served by including letters beneath the sounds on the Transition Sentence Cards, she could not see what good the worksheet writing activity would do her students. But at least the introduction of writing the letters on the worksheets had gone smoothly, and her faster learners were now busily engaged in a new level of activity.

One concern Ms. X had about the transition level of activities was how the other members of each learning group would react to the few students who were being allowed to write out letters while everyone else was still only using the sounds. Ms. X was pleased to discover, however, that the children in each group reacted no differently to the addition of the transition materials than they had to any of the other successively higher levels of materials already introduced throughout the year.

Ms. X had gone out of her way to make sure everyone in her room believed that he or she was going to become a reader. She had often explained to her students how not everyone learns at the same speed, just as not

everyone runs at the same speed. Though the speeds may not be the same, everyone learns just as everyone runs. It appeared to Ms. X that everyone must have believed her, because no one seemed to be bothered by the fact that some students were already writing letters while others would have to wait.

After a while, though, it occurred to Ms. X that maybe it wasn't because everyone believed her, but quite simply because no one cared where anyone else was in the program anyway. Ms. X had made a point of not overemphasizing the achievements of any one student as compared to another. She had always praised each of her students for how well they were doing as compared only to their own individual rates of progress. Each of her students really did seem content with themselves as learners and pleased with their own rate of advancement. Ms. X couldn't say for sure why no one felt bad that some children got to write with letters and some didn't. But the more she thought about it, the less she could say for sure why she had even thought this would be a problem in the first place.

There was a side benefit to the transition-level activities at the Worksheet Station that Ms. X hadn't anticipated. The slower learners, like Anthony, seemed to enjoy the fact that they were now sharing their worksheets with the faster learners, like Russell. Anthony was now working with the earliest Two-Sound Worksheets. Russell's working at the transition level with these same Two-Sound Worksheets seemed to give the worksheets a renewed credibility and status in Anthony's eyes. It had been a long time since Anthony had actually worked at the same level as most of the other children in the room. He was still diligently plugging away at his Workjobs and two-sound words, and it gave him a great deal of pleasure to have Russell use the very same materials as he was using.

The Worksheet Station was now a transition-level station as well. The students had adapted quickly to the new uses made of the materials, and the learning groups were able to proceed as smoothly with the new activities as they had before their introduction. Ms. X was growing a little less uneasy about this new level, even though she still did not see how it actually helped anybody learn to read without the sounds.

The Book Station required no changes at all. Ms. X had already introduced the Transition Level Books as her faster learners had begun the phrase level of activities. There were no more books for her to introduce until her students began adding to the class library by authoring their own. This wasn't to take place until the next level of the program. Supposedly, the students at the transition level would begin reading the books differently now, but Ms. X did not see how that was going to happen.

The Tiny Writing Cards that were the phrase-level materials at the Stamping Station were to serve as the transition-level materials as well. As had been true for the worksheets, the Tiny Writing Cards were already coded for writing. The students used their Decoding Charts to translate sounds into letters and words.

Whereas the worksheets had allowed Ms. X's students to practice using their Decoding Charts one new row at a time, the Tiny Writing Cards used the

entire Decoding Chart from the very beginning. For this reason, Ms. X delayed switching the use of the Tiny Writing Cards from the phrase level to the transition level until she was confident that students beginning transition-level activities were proficient in using their Decoding Charts.

When Ms. X determined her students were proficient in using their Decoding Charts, she asked them to begin writing out letters for their Tiny Writing Cards instead of stamping out the words. Apart from writing out the letters, the assignment remained exactly the same. The students took a piece of drawing paper, transferred the Tiny Writing Card words to it, and then illustrated the words.

Ms. X thought that the writings and illustrations on the drawing paper looked very impressive. For the first time, her students were writing out words that would be readily recognizable by any adult, and drawing pictures to show they knew what these words meant. Even though Ms. X was not convinced that her students could truly read what they had written, she still sent their work home with them. She knew her students could read the words that accompanied their drawings because their illustrations would remind them of what the words said. She knew, too, that the positive feedback parents would give their children for this accomplishment would be very good for her children's image of themselves as learners.

The fifth learning station to feel the impact of the transition level activities was the Handwriting Station. Actually, the full title of this station as listed on the Components Chart was “Handwriting/Decoding”. Until the beginning of the transition level activities, the Handwriting/Decoding Station had been devoted exclusively to the improvement of letter-writing skills. At the start of the transition activities, however, use of the Decoding Chart had been added to the items for practice at the station. Now, the transition students were ready to begin work on the Sight Word Worksheets.

The Sight Word Worksheets served several purposes not accomplished by other levels of the program. They also represented a substantial departure from the activities that preceded them at any of the learning stations.

At the beginning of the program, when children were at the two and three-sound levels, almost all the words the students were asked to read were either nouns or verbs. When the words to be read are to describe something that can be illustrated, words like cat, or toy, or run, are much more suitable for reading than words like and, or of,' or the. Many of the words in the books for young children consist of words that are not easily illustrated. The Sight Word Worksheets provide children with a good-sized vocabulary of these commonly used words for reading and for writing.

An additional purpose of the Sight Word Worksheets is to provide students with intensive practice in the use of their Decoding Charts. Each of the Sight Word Worksheets is a page of words formed from sound-pictures. To complete the worksheet, a child looks at each word in turn and writes its spelling beneath it. Unlike the worksheets at the Worksheet Station, there are no pictures to circle to indicate that what has been read has been understood. Unlike the Tiny Writing Cards, there are no illustrations to draw. All of the

child's work time is devoted exclusively to the task of writing out as many of the words on as many of the Sight Word Worksheets as he or she is able to write in the time allotted. Because the Sight Word Worksheets make no requirement of the students other than the use of the Decoding Chart to record appropriate spellings for the sounds, the worksheets themselves have the specific effect of providing extensive practice in using the Decoding Charts.

Although Ms. X was aware that her transition-level students would receive a great deal of practice in using their Decoding Charts as a result of their experience with the Sight Word Worksheets, she did not know of what benefit this practice would be. Her students were always allowed to have access to a Decoding Chart whenever they needed it, and the Worksheet Station had shown her that her students knew quite well how to use their Charts. After her students had been working with the Sight Word Worksheets for a few weeks, Ms. X began to notice that in many situations, students had stopped using their Charts. This was not because they had become bored with the Charts and were just guessing at the spellings. It was because her students had actually internalized the Charts, or at least large parts of them.

Ms. X noticed that her students seemed to pass through three stages in developing this freedom from the Chart. These stages were passed through, not for the whole Chart at once, but for each separate sound on the Chart in its turn. This meant that some students had advanced to the point of having internalized nearly the whole Chart, while others merely abandoned its use for the spellings of specific sounds.

The three stages Ms. X observed were the following:

1) The child looked at the sound on the worksheet, looked up the spelling for that sound on the Decoding Chart, and then wrote the spelling on the worksheet.
2) The child looked at the sound on the worksheet, wrote down the spelling on the worksheet, and then looked up the spelling on the Decoding Chart just to make sure.
3) The child looked at the sound on the worksheet, wrote down its spelling, and did not bother to look it up on the Chart because he or she already knew it was the correct spelling.

Ms. X marveled at how well her students seemed to be learning many of the spellings on the Chart. She did not want to praise her students for this accomplishment, however, because she did not want any of her students to feel they were required to memorize their Decoding Charts. Her faster learners were the ones using the Charts now, but everybody would reach this same point eventually. She didn't know what would happen when Anthony reached the transition level. She did not wish to set up a situation in advance that would make Anthony feel he had to memorize his Chart

With the introduction of the Sight Word Worksheets, Ms. X had completed the addition of the transition-level activities to the range of materials her class had available to it. The presentations hadn't been the disaster she had feared, and she could settle back into her usual teaching and helping routine again.

Ms. X could not say exactly how it happened or even when it happened, but she began to notice a definite change in how her children at the transition level were reading the materials that she had assigned them. The change she noticed was in how these students went about reading the words on their Transition Sentence Cards and in their Transition Books.

When Ms. X first introduced the Transition Sentence Cards, her students read the sound-pictures and ignored the letters. Now, however, they had almost entirely reversed the process. Now, when they read one of the cards, they would read the traditionally spelled words as a matter of choice. The only time she saw them look at the sounds above the words was in those specific instances when they were unable to read the word in its traditional form. The sound-pictures that appeared above the words now served as a readily available pronunciation guide. The students read what they could in the traditional form. Whenever they did not know a word, they had only to look directly above it for its sounds.

Ms. X didn't know how this had come about. But even in her most skeptical mood, she had to admit to herself that her transition-level students were reading. They were actually transitioning away from the use of the sound-pictures and were reading the same kinds of words she could read. She could not say why it had happened, but she knew for sure it was happening.

The February Assessment

In mid-February, Ms. X decided it was once again time for her to assess her students. She had not conducted an assessment of everyone in class since November. She was most curious to see how much progress the class had made. She also knew it would be nice to have an updated record of where each student was, so she would have a progress report to show the parents and administrators who might drop by her room from time to time.

As Ms. X had done in November, she began her assessment by attempting to fill it out from memory. Even though her students were much more spread out in terms of the levels at which they were working than they had been in November, Ms. X found she had a much better knowledge of where everyone was now than she had for the earlier assessment. She found there were only three or four students she couldn't place with absolute certainty. However, even for these students, she had an almost certain opinion.

Ms. X was impressed with how well she had come to know the ability levels of her students. She wasn't surprised that she knew so much about each student. Rather, she was pleased that the Reading Program had allowed her so much opportunity to work with her students as individuals. The February assessment only served to make conscious a thought that Ms. X had already been aware of. Through the Reading Program, she had come to know the capabilities and accomplishments of this set of students better than she had been able to learn about any of her previous classrooms of five-year-olds.

By February, reading was beginning to seem like something that everyone was going to be able to do. Anthony was still struggling with two-sound blending, but he was the only one of the students who had been in Ms.

X's room from the start of the school year who was still having trouble. Ms. X could see, though, that the trouble Anthony was having in February was not the same trouble he had in November. In November, he hardly knew any sounds. In February, he hardly knew very many words, but their individual sounds were no longer a problem. He was still the bottom student, but the bottom was moving up. The results of Ms. X's February assessment can be seen in the Chapter 3 Class Assessment Sheets, page 96.