

April - and a Little Before

Vowels-Only Level and Creative Writing

Unfortunately for Ms. X, her growing feeling of comfort with the Reading Program only extended to the present and to the past. It didn't keep her from worrying about what would happen when Russell and his friends were ready to begin work at the vowels-only level of activities.

By early March, it was becoming painfully obvious to Ms. X that Russell and a few others could manage all the materials at the transition level quite well. Generally, they read the words written in the traditional alphabet and only looked at the sounds when they were unsure of a word. Since Russell and his friends were now reading so well, they were also using up all the materials Mrs. X had available for them at much to rapid a pace. The faster learners couldn't really be asked to redo worksheets or tiny writing cards they had already completed correctly. They had already learned from those materials what they were supposed to have learned.

Even though Ms. X was not anxious to introduce the final level of materials to her faster students, she found she was only mildly nervous about what came next. The uncertainty of what lay ahead at each new level had always given her concern. But the fact that each of the levels she had introduced had been absorbed by her class much more easily than she had anticipated gave her hope that this last level would go well, too. If the vowels-only level proved to be a success, there was the definite benefit that no other levels followed it. There was no way Russell or any of the other students who had accompanied him in his relentless push through the program could ever get through all the vowels-only activities, because the vowels-only materials were, for the most part, created by the students themselves.

The concern Ms. X had about the vowels-only level was that it was so different from any of the levels through which her students had previously passed. At each of the earlier levels, her students always had available to them the sound-pictures. These sound-pictures had been the main factor in allowing Ms. X's faster learners to make easy sense out of reading. Even the transition level of the program had made the sound-pictures readily available. The vowels-only level had no equivalent assistance.

What would happen to Ms. X's fastest and most able learners when nearly all of the sounds disappeared from above the words she now asked them to read? How would they react to the removal of the aides that, heretofore, had made all their reading happen with so little effort? Where could these students turn for help without the sound-pictures as their guides? Would they now become so lost in reading that they would demand the teacher's constant attention, since there would now be no classmates who could help them with their reading questions? What if, after all this time spent reading and blending the sound-pictures into words, Ms. X found that her faster students couldn't read words in any other form?

Ms. X's list of potential concerns was extensive. It may be wondered, then, why she was less nervous about introducing the vowels-only level of

activities than she had been for any of the previous levels. She was less nervous, partly because she was teaching kindergarten. Although kindergarten is an important year in the school life of a child, it most certainly isn't the year anybody expects children to learn to read. If it turned out that none of her students could read, she wouldn't have ruined any children. Their first-grade teacher could teach them to read instead.

Although Ms. X was nervous about how well her students would do without the aid of sounds stamped above each letter, she was reassured by the many words she knew her students could already read and spell. They had learned these words from the Sight Word Worksheets. In addition, her faster students were already reading most of the words on both the transition sentence cards and the transition level books without looking at the sound-pictures printed above them. The sounds were always there if needed, but since her faster students usually didn't look up at the sounds, it just might be possible these same students might not be completely lost if there weren't any sounds there at all. In fact, it just might be possible that these faster learners were already reading traditional words, and the vowels-only level would simply put the finishing touches on a process already well on its way to completion.

In early March, Ms. X introduced the vowels-only level of activities to a select few students in her classroom. The first learning station to which Ms. X introduced the new set of activities was the Picture Packet Station. By now, both she and her students were old hands at the process of adding new levels of activities to the learning stations.

Once Ms. X had introduced the Vowels-Only Cards to go along with the Picture Packets, there really weren't any other materials left to introduce at any of the other learning stations. Ms. X had been more or less aware of the absence of any books or worksheets or stamping activities at the vowels-only level, but this vague awareness did not translate itself into reality until after the Vowels-Only Cards had been set out for her faster learners to use. With the introduction of the Cards, she had presented the last of the actual reading materials included in the kit. When Ms. X made this realization, her anxiety level increased measurably. What were her faster students to do at all the other learning stations when there were no specific vowels-only materials for them to use when they got there?

Ms. X eased her panic somewhat by reviewing the Teacher's Manual and rediscovering what was supposed to take place at the remaining stations. In theory, at least, her vowels-only students were to be spending their time at three of the remaining stations engaged in creative writing. The Book Station was to be devoted to reading what they wrote at the other three stations.

The Teacher's Manual suggested that Ms. X introduce the Vowels-Only Cards to accompany the Picture Packets and change nothing else in the learning routine of her students. This would then permit her the time to assess how well her vowels-only level students could handle reading words without all the sounds stamped out above them. It would also permit her the time she needed to teach her students the few remaining techniques and procedures they would need before they could begin creative writing.

In advance of introducing her students to creative writing, Ms. X prepared an individual chalkboard and spelling notebook for each student. To minimize the amount of time needed for instruction and to maximize the number of people each student would have available to help him or her, Ms. X decided to pull all of the students who were ready to begin creative writing away from their regular groups and form them into a special group of their own. This special group was not to be a permanent arrangement. It was only established to make the initial teaching easier.

Ms. X couldn't help wishing this was her second year of the program, so she would already know how all of this would turn out. The program had been tested on too many children in too many classrooms for there to be any doubts. But as Ms. X began to explain creative writing to her students, all of the testing on all of the other children who had used the program made no difference to her. What mattered was the children in her class and what they did now. This outcome, she was both excited and reluctant to see.

Ms. X had two basic plans for creative writing from which to choose. She could either ask her students to draw a picture and then write a story to go along with it, or she could ask them to write the story first and then illustrate it. Eventually, her students would end up using both of these procedures and a few more ways that hadn't even occurred to her. For now, though, Ms. X decided she would prefer to have her student begin by writing the words.

As her small group of vowels-only students gathered around her, Ms. X talked to them about the interesting things that had happened to them during this school year. She asked each group member to think of something that had happened that he or she wanted to share with the group. No, it didn't have to have happened at school. It could have happened anywhere.

After each member of the group had talked about his or her adventures, Ms. X told the group that she wanted to make a book out of their stories. This book would be put at the book station so that everyone else in class could read about the stories they had told.

The prospect of having their stories made into a book seemed to please the group members, so Ms. X provided the details of how this was to be accomplished. She gave each of them an individual chalkboard and a piece of chalk. She told them they were to write down what they wanted to say on the chalkboard. After they had written it all down, they would bring their boards to her for proofreading. She would make sure everything was spelled correctly, so that other people could read what they had meant to say. When the chalkboard was proofread, they could copy their story from the chalkboard onto lined paper. They could then draw a picture to go along with their story. All their lined paper writings would be combined with their drawings and made into a book for the Book Station.

The group was also told that there were two sources for figuring out how to spell any words they didn't already know how to spell. First, they could listen for the sounds in the word and then write down the spelling for those sounds. If they didn't know what spelling to use for a particular sound in a word, they could ask Ms. X which spelling to use. Second, if they couldn't hear

all the sounds in the word, they could bring their spelling notebook to Ms. X, and she would write the word in their notebook for them. When they brought Ms. X their notebooks, they should open their book to the page for the sound with which the word began.

There was a third source for words, of course, but Ms. X did not expect this source to have much immediate impact. This third source was the students themselves. They had been taught throughout their whole experience with the Reading Program to turn to one another for help. It was only natural that they would now turn to each other for help in spelling words, as well.

Ms. X expected the students themselves to be an eventual source for spellings, but she was pleasantly surprised when she found how much her students already had to share with one another. She had forgotten that all of these students had already passed through the Sight Word Worksheets and, collectively at least, they were beginning their creative writing assignment with a spelling vocabulary of several hundred words. In addition, a word for which one student might have difficulty identifying the individual sounds might prove much less difficult for a neighbor. Ms. X had taught her students that none of us is as smart as all of us. As this cluster of students began their creative writing, they showed Ms. X that they had learned what they had been taught.

As her creative writing students progressed, Ms. X's sense of uneasiness about their ability to read and write without the sounds dissipated rapidly. These faster learners were not quite ready for college yet, but they were most definitely capable of both reading and writing. Ms. X was so impressed with what they could do, in fact, that she soon added the requirement that each student who finished writing his or her story on a chalkboard had to have another student working at the creative writing level proofread it before the chalkboard was brought to her for final approval. This extra step helped eliminate many minor spelling errors before Ms. X even saw the writing.

Ms. X found that her students were not very good at knowing when to bring her their spelling notebooks for a word, because they often thought they could spell words that, as it turned out, they couldn't. They were very good at listening to the sounds in words, but there is more to spelling than hearing sounds. "Jress" for example, is a good approximation of "dress", but creative writing does not also mean creative spelling.

Ms. X found that the best use of the spelling notebooks came when she was correcting the work on the chalkboards. If a child had spelled a word incorrectly, Ms. X had that student open his or her notebook to the appropriate page. Ms. X then wrote the correct spelling in the notebook. When all the correct spellings for the chalkboard essay were added to the notebook, the child then returned to his or her work area and revised the chalkboard using the notebook as a guide. The revised writing was then resubmitted to Ms. X as a double check before it was transferred to paper. Ms. X found that children rarely misspelled a word again once she had written it in their notebooks. Because she had written it and they had copied it out, they seemed almost always to remember that the word was in their notebooks to be looked up when they needed its spelling again.

As soon as Ms. X's creative writing students completed their first writings and drawings, she used her small stamps to convert their writing to a vowels-only form. Ms. X had already become a stamping expert through the practice she had received using the larger stamps to stamp out the words for the whole-class experience stories. By comparison, stamping out only the vowels that appeared in the creative writing of her students went very quickly.

Although each student who had prepared a creative writing story had no difficulty in reading what he or she had written, it was not as easy for these same students to read all the words written by their classmates. The student who had been to Yosemite, for example, had no difficulty reading that word in her own writing. Students unfamiliar with the word, however, found that the vowel stamps to be of great assistance.



Yosemite

Students who were not yet ready to begin the vowels-only level of the program found either that the vowel stamps provided them some clue, or no clue at all as to a word's meaning, depending upon how far they had progressed through the Reading Program. In any event, Ms. X found that all of her students enjoyed reading or at least trying to read the stories their classmates had written. Those who couldn't read could always be read to, for, after all, none of us is as smart as all of us.

Ms. X was pleased with the output of books from her now growing number of creative writers. To add to the number of vowels-only books at the book station, Ms. X continued using the small stamps to convert her own private collection of classroom books to the vowels-only level of books. Although this process took a little time, Ms. X knew that the books she was converting now would already be ready for her next year's students and for students in all the years after that, as well.

Once Ms. X had introduced the Vowels-Only Cards to accompany the Picture Packets and once she had presented creative writing to her select group of students, everything settled back to the usual routine. The students continued their daily rotation through the learning stations. She continued to work with the individuals she felt needed her assistance. Students continued to learn and advance from one level to the next, as their minds continued to master new concepts in their own unpredictable and magical ways.

At each of the other points in the year when Ms. X had introduced the faster students to a new level of activities, she had correspondingly changed the whole-class activities associated with the Reading Program to match the work of these faster learners. When she had introduced these students to the transition level materials, for example, the whole-class experience stories had become transition level stories, as well.

At the vowels-only level, Ms. X did not continue the practice of changing the whole-class activity to match the level of the faster learners. Instead, she

maintained the transition-level experience stories. The students at the vowels-only level could read many of the experience stories without resorting to the sounds at all. If they did need to glance up at the sounds, it wouldn't set them back in their reading development if all the sounds were there instead of just the vowels. On the other hand, if only the vowels were stamped above the written words, too few students would gain much from the experience stories at all. The transition level was a good level at which to remain for whole-class activities because the transition level offered learning for everyone.

The April Assessment

As all of Ms. X's students continued to learn, their activity levels continued to advance. Some students made big jumps, some moved along at their own slow, steady pace. All were learning. Since Ms. X had already been pulled through all of the levels of the program by her faster learners, she felt quite competent now to meet the needs of each subsequent student or group of students who were ready to move from one level to the next.

Ms. X's reading time in April was spent much as it had been in February and in all the months in between. Her students rotated between their learning stations, working on the materials they found at each new location. Ms. X watched them, assessed them, and helped them. They continued to learn. She, too, continued to learn.

As April arrived, Ms. X decided it was time for one last formal assessment of her class. She might have waited until May, but her desire to see how far her class had come since she first measured them in November outweighed her ability to wait another month. Ms. X had no doubt now about her ability to fill out the assessment sheet from memory. She knew she knew all of her students. The assessment sheet was her proof of this knowledge. The results of Ms. X's April assessment can be seen in the Chapter 3 Class Assessment Sheets, page 97.

The description of Ms. X's gradual introduction of each new level of the Reading Program to her students has, of necessity, placed the emphasis on the faster learners in her room. It is the faster learners in class who always encounter the new levels or activities first, because it is these students who are first ready for the materials. This same description has also emphasized the concern and anxiety Ms. X faced as her faster learners pressured her to move on to each higher level before she felt comfortably ready to do so. Because of this, one could come away from the description of the various levels of the program with the impression that Ms. X spent a good part of her time looking after the needs of her fastest learners. This impression would not yield an accurate reflection of the order of priorities in effect in Ms. X's classroom. Actually, Ms. X spent the majority of her time working with the slower learners.

One of the several reasons why Ms. X felt anxiety whenever she knew she had to introduce her faster learners to a new level of activity, was because she was afraid these faster learners would not remain self-sufficient at the next level. At their present level, whatever that level might be, the faster learners received little assistance from Ms. X. Apart from the occasional individual

assessments on rates of progress, she often left these students to fend for themselves. Her teaching time was devoted mainly to her other students.

Ms. X was pleased that her faster learners were making progress, but she would not have been upset if these students had, say, reached the phrase level of activities and gone no further. She had no upper-level expectation for how far her fastest learners should advance through the Reading Program. She only had expectations for how much progress she hoped to achieve for the students like Anthony, who made up the bottom rung of the achievement levels within her classroom.

Anthony had surprised Ms. X. She had established the goal for Anthony that he be able to read two-sound words by the end of the year. She had not announced this goal to Anthony. Having seen how much trouble Anthony had with learning just a few sounds, Ms. X had little faith that he would learn to read any words at all. She had only established the reading two-sound words goal for Anthony because the Teacher's Manual indicated this goal should be her minimum expectation for all of her kindergarten students. The April assessment showed Anthony to be a good two-sound reader. By May, he was actually reading three-sound words. Anthony would never be a "Russell" but thanks to the Reading Program, he wouldn't have to be an "Anthony" either.