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# BLACK STUDENTS GET AN EDGE IN READING

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The purpose of this article is not so much to report that minority children are having trouble in learning to read – all kinds of children are for that matter – but to point out that with the proper kind of instruction black children can do as well as other children. Consider briefly the findings of a few research studies documenting contentions about the reading acquisition problems that numbers of black children have.

In 1968, Harris, Morrison, Gold and Lerner reported the results of their three-year study (CRAFT Project) of primary-grade reading instruction with 2,000 disadvantaged black children in New York City. At the beginning of first grade the median reading-readiness score was at the 20th percentile on national norms.<sup>1</sup>

Downing, et. al., noted that in a junior high school located in a black slum-ghetto section of New York City the mean reading score at the beginning of grade seven was 4.8 grade placement. Only 18 percent of the black pupils were at or above grade level.<sup>2</sup>

In 1970, Lewis, Bell and Anderson found that blacks of junior high ages (compared to whites) scored lower in several tests of symbol substitution – tests of learning or perceptual-motor speed – and in reading, but higher in the Myklebust Picture Language Story Test.<sup>3</sup> The findings of this study imply that perhaps the language of black children is not so deficient as some people think.

Cohen and Cooper have noted the following about the language of black children:

1. It is the school's hostile atmosphere rather than a lack of verbal facility that makes it appear that urban black children are less verbal.
2. Studies show much (rather than little) verbal interaction in the lower class family.
3. Black English is a sophisticated language system, not an inferior form of standard English.
4. The school's requirement that the child translate from black English to standard in order to communicate with his/her teacher results in a communication breakdown.
5. This child's vocabulary is certainly sufficient for initial reading acquisition.
6. Training designed to improve the oral language of these pupils does not affect power in reading.

7. The few articulation and auditory discrimination problems that exist among these pupils can usually be overcome by training.<sup>4</sup>

If it is not language that makes the difference in reading achievement of disadvantaged pupils, what is it? Is it the instructional materials? Is it the methods? Is it the teacher? Bond and Dykstra, in their review of the First Grade Studies of the sixties, concluded that the teacher makes the difference in first grade reading achievement. However, there were indications that there are facets such as the desirability of introducing words at a rapid pace and encouraging pupils to write symbols as they learn to recognize and associate them with sounds that tend to produce children with superior word recognition abilities at the end of grade one.<sup>5</sup>

Teachers are important, as Bond and Dykstra asserted, but first one needs to show what happens to the child who is given systematic, sequential instruction by the teacher but not at a rate nor of the type that permits mastery of the material before having new material introduced. Second, reference will be made to an experimental study that has solved some of the problems that have been raised.

What is happening *in* grade one to the child who does not progress well? (1) Often s/he is the child who has been started in reading before s/he could handle it. (2) Cumulative deficits, so deleterious to self-concept and progress in reading, build up under the following all-too-common, non-mastery conditions:

<i>New Words in Lesson</i>	<i>Number Not Learned</i>	<i>Cumulative Deficit</i>
5	2	-2
3	2	-4
4	2	-6
3	2	-8

So after only four lessons 8 of 15 words are not learned. It is not very long before this child becomes the stigmatized child who doesn't fit, who develops a poor self-concept, and who is so non-fluent that s/he cannot fit the pieces together to develop any meaning whatsoever. This child needs instruction that is meaningful and that is paced so that s/he can handle the tasks systematically.

What happens in grade two? Is the child placed at her/his level? Is the child put into materials s/he has some control of what s/he is learning? Is the child put into materials that have been shown by research to be efficacious? The answer to these questions for too many children is "evidently not" or we would not have so many children in such dire straits and so many older students and young adults who are functionally illiterate.

There are two definitive pieces of research executed since the First Grade Studies to show how black children can learn to read. In 1972, Briggs (Palmer) conducted an experimental study among rural disad-

vantaged black and white children.<sup>6</sup> The subjects were first and second grade males and females from a rural community in Northern Florida.

During the three-month period of instruction the experimental group used *The Sound Reading Program*,<sup>7</sup> a set of linguistic programmed materials that consists of a series of eight work texts in which decoding and comprehension books are odd-numbered and even-numbered, respectively.

The experimental groups worked through the materials sequentially, each child at her/his own pace. The control group continued in the regular ongoing reading programs, materials including several basal series as well as work books, ditto sheets, and some teacher-made materials.

Although there was no evidence found in this particular experiment to indicate that the treatment was differentially effective for grade one, the study did support the treatment effect for grade two in both comprehension and word recognition. The first two salient findings were emphasized by Briggs (Palmer) in her original report, but the significance of the third finding had not been underscored previously. The salient findings are:

1. The experimental group had significantly higher scores on the *Sound Reading Test: Vocabulary*\* than did the control group ( $F = 8.37$ ,  $df = 1, 73$ ,  $p < .01$ ).
2. The experimental group had higher scores on the *Gilmore Oral Reading Test* (Comprehension) than did the control group ( $F = 4.18$ ,  $df = 1, 72$ ,  $p < .05$ ).
3. In the experimental group, which utilized *The Sound Reading Program* (SRP), there was a significant disordinal interaction of race and experimental-control treatment ( $F = 4.04$ ,  $df = 1, 72$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Scores on the dependent variable, the *Gilmore Oral Reading Test* (Accuracy), were significantly greater for black pupils under the experimental condition and for white pupils under the control condition.

In essence, Briggs (Palmer) concluded that *The Sound Reading Program* was more effective with rural disadvantaged children in the second grade than was the eclectic method and that black children did much better than expected.

In 1974 Morgan used the same materials as the core reading program to teach reading acquisition and reading improvement skills to black and white urban disadvantaged youth in a federally financed program in Albany, Georgia.<sup>9</sup> The program proved to be cost effective: it yielded good results and did so more economically than the programs used previously with those students. This exemplary program, so designated by the U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, is still in operation.

Why could the black children in these two studies relate to the ex-

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\*All 50 words on the SRP Vocabulary Test are found in the Harris-Jacobson Vocabulary List—49 on the Core List and one on the Additional List.<sup>8</sup> Since the range of instructional materials in the SRP is from pre-primer to grade four, one would expect a range of vocabulary difficulty. Ninety percent of the words on the test fell between pre-primer level and grade four level, inclusive. The other ten percent were at the fifth and sixth grade levels.

perimental instructional materials? Careful observations point to the following reasons:

1. The language was not quite so formal as in some programs.
2. The cartoon illustrations touched their sense of humor.
3. The stories were about real life family and work-a-day world situations. The two white families and the black family cooperated in many endeavors to improve their families and the community in which they lived.
4. The children could get deeply involved:
  - a. They wrote responses and read responses. (Also, the first grade studies showed that programs that encouraged people to write symbols as they learned them and associated them with sound were more effective.)
  - b. Contrary to the case in many self-instructional programs, the children did not use the materials incorrectly; for example, they did not cheat.
  - c. The children could move as rapidly as they wanted to. (Remember the First Grade Studies that showed the advantage of rapid pacing—where children can master the material, too, as they go along.)
5. The experimental methods/materials are psychologically sound:
  - a. The pupils learned the construction of the word.
  - b. They read through the entire word for cues, not neglecting the middle part of the word.
  - c. They were able to use context cues and graphophonic cues.
  - d. Because of the use of the modified cloze procedure in the comprehension books, the readers were “forced” to demand meaning and, therefore, predict meaning.

The implications of the research cited in this article for curriculum planning are very clear:

1. There is available psychologically and socio-culturally sound reading material that research and hands-on experience show to be effective in teaching reading acquisition skills to culturally disadvantaged—rural and urban—black and white students.
2. Curriculum planners are encouraged to take into consideration in their planning of reading programs the findings and conclusions set forth in this article.

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