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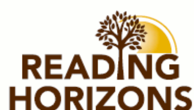

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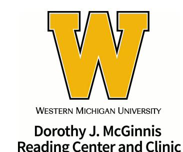

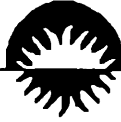

Creating a Disabled Reader: A Father's Perspective

Jerry Phillips

"I never read much; I have something else to do" (Austen, 1986).

Despite the dismissal of reading by John Thorpe, a character created by Jane Austen to poke fun at ignorant, egocentric young men, people are always learning to read. This is not different from other types of human behavior. Goodman (1976) argues that people purposely play a cognitive guessing game. Whether literate or not, they make predictions in everyday life situations — but being literate makes the game easier to play. This is especially true in school learning situations. Parents want their children to be competent in reading so the children can play the game on a level field. However, the school reading game can be a "no win" situation when played in certain contexts. Despite the pervasiveness and ease Goodman used to characterize the acquisition of literacy, my daughter, Charlie, echoed the opinions of Jane Austen's character.

Preschool

I was a teacher in Texas during Charlie's preschool years. I provided a print-rich environment, and was an adequate literacy role model. We visited book stores and libraries, selected pleasing material, enjoyed books daily and developed a special reading time and place. We read to each other, and she displayed a healthy interest in print. I

sensed she was going to become an active reader. She entered a center advocating a philosophy that reading with children was an excellent introduction to the value of literacy. She participated in self-expressive creative reading events, practiced home language, became comfortable learning parental rules and met verbal expectations. I believed she was ready for school.

Kindergarten

Charlie enrolled in kindergarten, and continued to develop established reading habits. I thought she would continue to learn about books because she liked school. The class took field trips to absorb environmental print in urban and rural contexts. She started writing during this time. Teachers and children read to each other. I recognized activities showcasing her literacy knowledge. She tried out existing knowledge while writing, and then experimented without direction or observation, sharing prior knowledge and seeking approval of a supportive teacher. Reading opened new doors, granted new experiences, and provided a way to enjoy leisure times. Research in emergent literacy (Teale, 1987) supports such activities.

Elementary school

The elementary years gave us a different reading perspective. Now reading became work, and took effort. While in elementary school Charlie was placed in a low reading group, based on miscuing eleven words in a story. She now understood that she was not a good reader. Placed in the low group, she continued to read and then re-read kindergarten books.

This grouping did not please me because it was a new and scary experience. I had difficulty accepting that Charlie would find reading rigid, visited the school, and asked about

the reading problem. "She has poor auditory memory." I wondered what this meant. "She cannot make the link between letters and sounds." I did not know what "making the link" meant, but knew she did not have a poor memory. Astonished at "poor," I questioned the teacher's sophistication about the learning process, and considered the differences in my memories of Charlie's rich emerging learning process and what I was hearing. Being a teacher, I trusted teachers to teach, to know what they were doing. However, I was not so sure about this one. The school told me not to worry; Charlie would eventually mature and learn to read better. Meanwhile, remedial lessons were in order. I placed my trust in the school. Parents, swayed by society, place confidence in those commissioned to teach.

Charlie passed reading. However, beyond the school, a dark side was emerging. She did not read at home. I noticed, but did nothing, thinking she was learning to read in school. She continued to struggle in the low group, resisting remedial instruction, spending more energy going to the water fountain than in remedial class. She found creative ways to avoid this class, such as permission to skip class to help create homecoming posters. Elementary school was her first contact with negative evaluation and labeling. She became confused and faced a difficult choice – accept the grouping and turn against herself, or reject the evaluation and value herself. She rejected negative evaluation, but accepted the grouping. Labeled unmotivated during these years, she turned from the standard curriculum, developed other interests, paid less attention to school learning, and the conflict led to acceptance of an alternative curriculum. Cazden (1985) claims that this conflict of learning interest means the child cannot bring outside prior knowledge into the school context.

Middle school

Competitive sports started in the seventh grade, and marked Charlie's drive toward athletic acceptance. This curriculum diverted attention from the classroom to the playground. I recognized the diversion when she came home discussing the new remedial groups. The low placement took her from friends, diverted attention from real reading and replaced it with structured exercises. She began to attend to outside learning activities and teachers began to lose her. However, the coaches did not lose. She became involved in the extra activities, and devoted extended effort and attention toward coaches. After-school activities took up her time to the extent that she found excuses not to finish regular assignments.

Charlie was not a permanent member of the remedial class. When reading class started, she left the regular classroom bound for another – singled out, separated and away from normal routine. I wondered about this and during school visits, I found she received the same instruction for remediation as the low reading class, only more. When she could not or would not pass a reading skills test, the school placed her in a special class offering more practice on individual skills. I did not have a strategy to improve the scores. I did not like test scores, but did not know what to do about her reading problem. Rather than leave the problem to the school, she decided not to worry about scores and remedial instruction – let the school play its games during the day and she would play hers afterwards. She was now active in all sports. I regarded this action as positive and encouraged it. If she could not excel in academics, maybe she could in extracurricular activities. She had at least found something positive and self-fulfilling. I could not understand the school's position, but I could understand hers.

Meanwhile, I tried to recapture the good reading times. Charlie had not learned to read well in spite of six classroom years. I introduced her to Judy Blume's books, which captured her attention momentarily. She read every one we could find, but soon there were no more. I believed she could read, but for some reason she would not perform for the school. I wondered about this. A child who looks forward to reading the Blume books at home should be able to read at school.

The content classes offered merely the raw materials of reading. The basals in Texas are skills-based and closely tied to skill-based mastery learning. Apparently, Charlie saw reading as a difficult decoding game having little to do with the meanings found in the Blume books. She would not play the reading game according to school rules, but decided to play for the coaches' team. She accepted an athletic peer group as a new source of self and rebelled against reading. Willis (1981) argues that learning forms in the process of students rebelling against the institution that has dominance over them. In Charlie's case, the motivation for reading was present early, but school erased it through a system of tracking. Her desire to be an athlete affirmed her motivation, as well as her external rebellion against skill-based instruction.

High school

In an effort at educational reform, Texas sought a rigid policy of "no pass, no play." Students must attain certain academic standards to participate in extra activities. This policy heightens the role of athletics as the reason for attending to academics, with athletic participation the reward for persevering through academics. Today, these standards do not bother Charlie. She tolerates coursework of the standard curricula to remain eligible for sports

participation. These alternative activities demand more time, and are more effective than regular school learning. This lifestyle is attractive, offering anti-attention discipline patterns – now tuned to the *thump-thump* of a basketball, and ignoring noun-verb agreements. This lifestyle has its own curriculum. Rather than study the questions at the end of the chapter, Charlie studies a text of basketball diagrams. Regular schoolwork has not challenged her, but she delights in the outside curriculum. The enthusiasm for sports reflects the pre-school success with literacy.

At present, Charlie struggles with reading in the content areas. She reads at home, not as much as I would like, but apparently as much as she cares to. She reads teen magazines, while family newspapers and magazines gather dust. Occasionally, I recommend a novel, but to no avail. Her recreational reading belongs to her. I salute this ownership because I know she can read. She just does not want to read school materials.

Charlie has coping strategies for academic tasks. I do not think they are markedly different from the norm. Many students use selected strategies to achieve grades. She reads textbook assignments by hunting for answers to chapter-end questions – a search and seizure syndrome; search the pages and seize the answers. She is good at listening attentively to teachers and peers, doing a minimum of homework and borrowing someone's notes. She is proficient at "apple polishing." She talked a teacher into giving repeated exams until the grade met the standard, yet cannot meet the state's standards for rounding numbers.

Today she is not interested in grades. Instead, she uses her strategies to maintain her position on the team. Her athletic ambition defines what and how it is learned. In

the conflict between reading what the school wants or what she wants, the school lost. She reads what she wants and chooses her own strategies.

Discussion

Looking back, I see that the school and I neglected Charlie's reading progress. I did not question teachers enough about the grouping practice; this was my mistake as a parent-teacher. It is a common practice that teachers do not question other teachers' methodology; however this may be an exaggeration of professional courtesy.

I see Charlie's problems rooted in social separation, standardized test scores, remedial instruction, and the school's disregard for research findings. These problems mesh, creating social learning conflicts between teachers and children. The methods of exclusion may be so subtle that none of the actors realized their involvement in the process. Rist (1970) defines tracking as separation for social purposes, and Rosenthal (1985) calls it the cumulative self-fulfilling prophecy. Regardless of label, Goffman's (1986) stigma of detachment was present throughout Charlie's school life, a blemish she will carry into adulthood.

Owen (1985) argues that standardized test scores drag students down a "track" of no return. The school tracked Charlie too early and left her on track too long. Kozol (1985) asserts that tracking schemes are more popular than ever. The good news is that they are being questioned. Critical theorists (Freire and Macedo, 1987) view them as outdated theories serving to divide social groups and maintain social boundaries that exist in the broader culture outside of schools. In effect, grouping and standardized test scores create and then reify a reality that is unassailable yet clandestinely subjective.

That grouping does not work is old news to those in reading research. Allington (1980a, 1980b) found children in high ability reading groups read two to three times as many words as children in low groups. McDermott (1985) argues that once classified, readers become chained to their social strata with differentiated instruction. Charlie will not "jump track" short of graduation. She squandered eleven years "on track." Only now, as a senior, does she feel free to express herself. She has enough credits to graduate, yet must still contend with mandated graduation requirements, and pass another test to graduate.

The school's approach to remediation is theory based, however there may be as many approaches as problems. Flesch (1981) argued that when children come to a dead end in their reading progress, they require an extended structured approach before risking additional exposure to new reading. Flesch's views are supported by powerful researchers in literacy, who would have remedial instruction focus on discrete sub-skills of literacy (LaBerge and Samuels, 1974). I oppose this approach because children should never come to a dead end in literacy progress. For many children, a corrective approach may make the child ashamed to read. Charlie's isolated skill-based remediation was a clumsy, unreliable system when compared with her pre-school success.

Charlie and I were not strong enough to hurdle learning roadblocks between successful beginnings and unsettled futures. She may have difficulty with literacy expectations in higher education. She believes she is a deficient reader, and her reading repertoire appears very limited. In the past, Charlie endured the school ways of gaining knowledge. Now, preparing for college, she realizes that all

knowledge is not school related. She grasped this by herself, and once I understood, I became an avid supporter.

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