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Cover Page Footnote

The author has worked with students from kindergarten through 12th grade and taught graduate courses in reading at Bank Street College. She received a degree in Education with a Specialization in Reading from Bank Street in 1984.

SPIDERS & WEBS: THE CORE CURRICULUM AND TUTORING
Deborah Ostrosky

Using the core curriculum for work with an individual child in a tutoring session has many different elements. As is true of classroom curriculum, cognitive and affective development as well as special interests must be taken into account. In work with one child, however, the curriculum is determined by the overall developmental needs of an individual rather than the balanced needs of a group. Also, the curriculum has its interactive basis between a tutor and child, rather than among a child, a group and a teacher.

Because a child in a tutoring arrangement usually has particular learning problems, the core curriculum must include work on specific skills and be tailored to the individual's learning needs. Also, an important element of the core curriculum is to have the child feel good about him/herself, allowing him/her to handle otherwise overwhelming assignments in smaller, more comprehensible tasks. Furthering a sense of success and mastery, important to any child, is best achieved in a tutoring situation by working through strengths to offset difficulties.

Finally the work of a core curriculum in a tutoring session must be brought back to the classroom for two reasons. First, a major goal of tutoring is to help a child become a more successful and confident learner and to aid the child in applying skills learned in the tutoring session to classroom situations. Second, core curriculum in tutoring arrangements lacks the social interaction of the classroom, the exciting interchange that occurs with and among peers. Although there are many benefits for a child in the one-on-one situation of a tutoring session, these do not include peer group socialization and feedback. Therefore, the core curriculum work in the tutoring session must be either a microcosm of the classroom's curriculum, or brought back into the classroom in some other manner. However, the tutoring should encourage more than the transference of skills to the classroom; other

38

tangible forms of learning that the child can share with his/her peers should be emphasized. This can occur through using pictures, writing a report or story, giving an oral report, making a game, or other interactive activities that allow the child to share knowledge with classmates.

In October, I began working with a child I shall call Nancy on a core curriculum about spiders. She was referred to me because of difficulties with spatial orientation, math, and organization and expression of her thoughts in both speech and writing. Much of her classroom's curriculum (for children ages 7-8) on mapping was beyond Nancy's conceptual understanding and she was "lost" with respect to classroom work. However, Nancy is a willing worker who loves to read.

A core curriculum on spiders seemed ideal for Nancy for several reasons. Nancy first expressed her interest in spiders through the book, *Charlotte's Web*, which she told me she loved. The book had been read to her twice and she had read it twice herself. As we talked about the events of the story, Nancy said she "used to be afraid of spider webs." I asked her if she was still afraid of them, and she answered "no," somewhat unsurely, adding "that was when I was little." I asked her if she wanted to learn more about spiders and she replied "yes." I thought this would be a good subject for Nancy since the classroom curriculum wasn't reaching her and she needed to feel knowledgeable in an area of study she chose.

Nancy began by reading about spiders. This was a good starting point since she is a capable reader, understanding and retaining most of what she reads. Our major source of factual information on spiders was a book called, *Jerry Finds Spiders*. It told about spiders from a child's point of view, allowing Nancy to hook onto the subject right away ("Maybe we can find spiders like Jerry."). When we got to a point in the reading where we found out how webs are made, we stopped reading and began discussing webs. We looked for where webs might be built. This was especially important to Nancy, an active child who uses her body often in expressing herself. Furthermore, since Nancy's spatial sense is weak, using her body to orient her search for places where webs could be built was a good, concrete, first step.

Nancy's next step was to begin drawing and representing webs. Although in talking about them she seemed to understand how the parts of a web were attached, her drawings showed separate parts of the web; she could not integrate the parts to make her drawing. She also had difficulty drawing a spiral shape; she drew circles over each other to represent the spiral. Much of my work with Nancy at this point was to help her form, sequence and integrate the parts of her drawing. It took much practice before she could fit all the parts together.

Once she understood on her own how to draw a web, I had her use a color system to draw each part of the web (i.e. the radial lines were one color, the spirals another). After she finished, we made a color key for each part. Since Nancy loves colorful things, this activity helped her *meaningfully* sequence each item in making the web and provided a framework for subsequent retelling of how she and spiders make webs. This also helped her work in the classroom. Although mapping and spatial orientation are still problems for Nancy, she is able to transfer some of her new knowledge about "reading" a picture to "reading" a simple map.

Nancy also represented spiders and their webs in several forms: with plasticine, on a blackboard with chalk, and on drawing paper. As we found out more about spiders, she realized that spiders had several types of webs. Talking and reading about webs led to a new interest in what spiders eat. This was extremely helpful to Nancy since part of her fear of spiders concerned what the spider webs catch. As she read more, she found out how spiders catch insects and that other animals eat spiders. This led us to rudimentary discussions about food chains. Nancy was beginning to understand life cycles. She was experiencing how new information can be connected with previously learned content.

Nancy's final project in the spider curriculum concerned the birth and reproduction of spiders. She was fascinated with the careful mating "dance" of some male spiders and by her discovery that females often eat male spiders if they are hungry. She was also interested in how the baby spiders survive since the female spider dies after laying her eggs. She found out how one spider, the wolf spider, survives and carries the

spiderlings on her back after they are born. After reading this, Nancy began to tell me about *Charlotte's Web*, and how Charlotte died before her eggs hatched. Information about spiders came alive for Nancy, as she made *her own* connections among sources of information.

Recently Nancy saw a television program about spiders which she excitedly described. Since Nancy has organizational problems and difficulty expressing herself, some of her information was confused, but she retained a considerable amount of detail which I recorded. For example, I listed the kinds of spiders that Nancy knew. I was then able to show Nancy in a concrete way that she retained and communicated a large amount of information. I called her an "expert" on spiders who probably knew more about spiders than most people. Her response was one of surprise (who me?) and pleasure. What she learned about spiders belonged to her, not a book or another person; she was beginning to see herself as a primary source of knowledge.

Because I wrote down some of the things Nancy told me about spiders, and because she was able to read my list, Nancy had visible proof of her knowledge and a concrete source of information (her own) to organize. This provided a springboard for Nancy to start writing about spiders. I was happy to see this take place for several reasons. First, I wanted Nancy to produce something as concrete proof of her learning. Also, since Nancy has difficulty in writing, I knew this would be an important step for her to initiate. I knew that Nancy enjoyed drawing and felt a sense of mastery through her pictorial representations of webs. Therefore I suggested that Nancy write and illustrate her own book. Nancy was enthusiastic about being both a writer and illustrator! Nancy's class uses the Graves' writing process and writing is a familiar, often-used part of the classroom curriculum. Thus, writing seemed an ideal bridge between the work done in the tutoring sessions and the work done in class. Finally, because a large part of the Graves' approach to writing involves sharing written work, I knew that Nancy's work and information about spiders would be shared with her class. This was important for Nancy because she needs social input and interaction with her peers. It also gave her the chance to be seen by the group

as a source of special knowledge rather than a person who has difficulty displaying what she knows.

At this point, Nancy is still in the process of writing down what she knows about spiders. As the spider unit becomes a greater part of her writing work in class and less a central part of our tutoring sessions, we will move to other activities and other content interests. This unit, however, has been important for Nancy. Not only has she developed expertise about a particular body of knowledge, but she has become a more active learner and communicator of knowledge. More importantly, she can see herself in that role. Nancy has also begun to integrate several skills in which she is weak, such as handwriting and the organizing and sequencing of information. Finally, this core curriculum has helped Nancy orient herself in space and make sense of the sometimes overwhelming amounts of information she receives from the environment. Thus, the "spiders and webs" curriculum has been a powerful source of integration for Nancy.

As a teacher/tutor, I found working with Nancy on this spider unit rewarding. It was a source of integration for me as well as Nancy, providing a link between my former work as a classroom teacher and my new work of teaching individual children. Admittedly, I worked with Nancy in an ideal situation. We had a good relationship from the start, and Nancy's classroom teacher was supportive and enthusiastic about the spider curriculum. Also, my own personal quest for ways to use the core curriculum with individual children was furthered. My main problem with the use of a core curriculum in tutoring is the lack of social input from the child's peer group. As a teacher, I missed the dynamic interaction that takes place within a group of children all engaged in the same core curriculum. Even though we found a way into the classroom through Nancy's writing, the spider curriculum lacked the richness a dynamic group would have provided. Perhaps in the future I would help the child develop a game or other activity that could be brought into the classroom.

In closing, I recommend that other teacher/tutors, whenever possible, use a core curriculum approach in their work with individual

children. Although the lack of peer group interaction remains a problem, creating a "bridge" between classroom and tutoring situations is possible.   A curriculum specially designed to help a child with a learning problem feel masterful in understanding and applying information can do much to enhance her sense of self-esteem.

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