

Heppenstall, K. (1996, Oct.22). Reading help is a matter of justice. The Age, Education Age, p. 2.

Unedited version

The interest in reading failure within the school and wider community has led to a number of initiatives designed to redress the problem. These initiatives have spread to secondary schools as teachers have become even more aware of the particular importance for secondary students of adequate reading skills. In the secondary system, reading is a major vehicle for gaining information in almost any subject, and students with underdeveloped skill are prevented from gaining access to a large part of the curriculum. It has even been argued that access to knowledge through reading is essential for continued intellectual development, and that those students unable to gain such access experience an intellectual decline.

Consider David, a student in Year 7. Neither he, nor his teachers and parents have fond memories of his primary school career. At Kinder he was quite active, didn't share very well, and his teacher was worried about his language development. In his early primary years his teachers usually had to explain things to him several times, and he was rarely able to finish tasks by himself. Reading was very slow to develop, and David's mother remembers that he was reluctant to bring his reader home, or to read with his parents, or read for pleasure. As he reached middle and upper primary he became increasingly difficult to motivate, and his parents were called to the school from time to time to discuss his behaviour. In the early years his parents were told that David was simply a little slow to develop, but would surely catch up later on. In his later years they were told that the main problem was his lack of effort.

Teacher comments, and secondary school screening-test results, indicate that David can only cope comfortably with text of a Year 3 difficulty level. His problems with texts are especially evident when he is presented with assignments, and this occurs in most of his subjects. His reading is characterized by slow, halting, error prone, word-by-word decoding. He has great difficulty in understanding what he reads mainly because of his lack of fluency, and he avoids reading where possible. David's written work is of a very low standard - rushed, shallow, and sloppily presented (barely legible, with multiple spelling and punctuation errors). He is tending to mix with a group whose values don't emphasise learning and co-operation. Some of his friends have been suspended from school recently, and David's parents are concerned that he may not survive very long in his school, although they are aware that the Department is encouraging students to stay longer in school to complete their secondary education.

Although the details vary, this scenario occurs regularly and predictably in our education system. At any given time, a percentage (usually between 10 and 20%) of students may be experiencing high levels of failure. Chronic school failure is arguably analogous to child abuse. In both cases the child is a relatively powerless element in a social system, and his/her position in the system is more or less inescapable. As with other forms of abuse the individual is likely to suffer real and serious damage. School failure has been linked with reduced self-esteem, anti-social behaviour (delinquency, aggression, and withdrawal), truancy, early school leaving, and even suicide.

Some schools view failure as a normal and inevitable outcome of teaching children in grades. From this perspective, failure may be attributed to a less than generous genetic endowment, illness or accident, family problems, or temperament. Unfortunately, such an attitude is often accompanied by a devaluation of the capacity of good teaching to make a significant difference. Hence if Johnny doesn't have "it", he won't make it. This attitude is strengthened by those who view children's development as akin to that of plants flowering i.e. at different times, in response to some internal clock which is unlikely to be hurried (and may be harmed) by intervention. Further, the view that children should take greater responsibility for their own learning is often misunderstood, and used as a rationale for not intervening with highly dependent learners. Of course, students can gradually accept greater responsibility for learning when first their competence, and thus their self esteem as learners, is developed. However expecting at-risk learners to initially assume such responsibility is to consign them to a cruel and unconscionable fate.

When the problem of chronic systemic school failure has been recognised, attempts to address it have often been piecemeal, and the approach reactive. Spending an extra 10 minutes twice a week with Alice in Year 5 on simultaneous reading, or three-letter blends, is unlikely to be rewarding for a teacher, parents, peer tutor, volunteer, or for the student in question. In addition there is often little attempt to systematically diagnose and teach the skills with which the child is struggling, or to evaluate the effectiveness of the attempts.

There are characteristics commonly ascribed by teachers to failing children. These may be some, or all of, distractability, inconsistency, slowness to grasp new concepts, limited recall, and difficulty in applying new skills in appropriate settings. Observation of failing children reveals that they are frequently unable to gain meaning from their school experiences unless those experiences are carefully structured to elicit understanding, i.e. the message is made clear and unambiguous. They may require a longer period of teaching to gain mastery, and especially, may require more practice than most children if they are to retain newly acquired concepts and skills. Paradoxically, failing children usually complete only a few practice examples of new skills or knowledge while successful students complete many.

One approach which has addressed these issues is Direct Instruction. It is a highly structured, teacher-directed approach to teaching basic skills such as reading, language, maths, spelling, and expressive writing. It is an empirically-based model which draws on three areas of research - how to provide a stimulating, orderly learning environment, how to logically organise knowledge to allow efficient teaching, and how to logically design the teacher-pupil communication to avoid ambiguity, and ensure effective learning occurs. One major assumption of the model is that failure to learn should be viewed as failure to teach effectively. Hence it is not students who fail - one does not need to look for reasons within the student (e.g. dyslexia), but rather one emphasises those elements of the program which have been ineffective. The focus is on the task, not the learner. Success is typically immediate and continuous because precise pre-skill analysis ensures that students begin any program at a point at which they are already competent, and because teaching occurs in small sequential steps. Programs usually take place in small groups (5-12, depending on the program) with children of similar skill levels. Given the number of children typically in need of help it is essential that our interventions can be presented in group format. One-to-one tutoring programs can also be effective, but can never be efficient, being too expensive for sufficient funding ever to be provided. Daily lessons contain revision of previously learned skills, continuous assessment and feedback, and presentation of new tasks. Massed and spaced practice have been found to be essential for students with a history of problems in learning basic skills, and careful attention is paid to these elements. In fact, careful attention to detail is often put forward as a major reason for the success of these programs. There is ample evidence, amassed over a long period of time and with a diverse range of problem learners, that these programs are successful. The commitment to detail extends to providing scripted lessons, and this has the additional advantage of allowing non-teachers a role in working with students experiencing failure (though usually a one-to-one role). This facility has been particularly useful for Integration Aides responsible for disabled students, and the clear educational objectives also allow Integration Support Groups to set and monitor precise educational goals. In addition, parents can be shown how to use the programs when schools are unable to do so.

Typically a lesson will comprise the following teaching functions - review, teacher presentation, guided practice, correction and feedback, independent practice, weekly and monthly review. The programs provide for the teaching of general case strategies rather than rote-learning, and they emphasise the importance of transfer of learning across relevant situations. This implies that skills learned in a reading class, for example, are also used outside that setting. An important research finding is that at-risk learners do not automatically use new skills in all the circumstances in which they are appropriate unless they are specifically taught to do so.

These programs have been successfully implemented for failing Year 7 and Year 8 students, especially in reading, but also can be provided in the primary setting. Adolescents may have experienced many years of failure, and their disaffection with learning, combined with an acute lack of confidence, introduces a secondary obstacle sometimes more difficult to overcome than the original basic skill problem. While success is achieved in terms of measured outcomes and parent and teacher reports, it has sometimes required initial, and even continuous, teacher support from an educational psychologist, or experienced consultant, as changes

of strategy, the addition of parent participation, and external reinforcement may be necessary to maintain some students' co-operation. When a group of troubled readers is assembled in a secondary school there is a significant likelihood that some will also display problematic behaviour. Best results in this eventuality are obtained with teachers who have a strong sense of the importance of an orderly classroom, and who are prepared to exert their influence in the best interests of the students in their care.

By introducing programs earlier in the students' careers some of these problems can be reduced, as the primary years represent a period when students are more easily enthused, more amenable to the teaching approach, and less perturbed by their briefer exposure to failure. Many of the schools which have become aware of the extent of the problem of reading failure, wish to address it at a level other than a simple increased exposure to quality literature; however, there are relatively few opportunities in most classrooms at mid primary and above for instruction in decoding as part of the general curriculum. This vacuum can be effectively and efficiently filled through the use of Direct Instruction programs, in particular - Corrective Reading.

Involvement at the early primary level is even more promising. Selecting students for assistance in their Prep year is not difficult. Often they have been children who have needed to repeat kinder, or have siblings with similar problems. Usually Kinder and Prep teachers are able to select the group at risk of failure. In addition, early screening tests are becoming quite accurate at identifying who among a group of beginners will experience failure if left unaided. Preventing failure is not only more humane, but also cost-efficient, as the effort and expense needed is less, and student-resistance has yet to develop. In a fair proportion of cases students have returned to the regular program within their first year of Direct Instruction with much increased competence, and the confidence to make progress under traditional classroom arrangements. Other (usually older) students have been withdrawn for 30-40 minutes/day for more than a year, and followed several levels of a reading program before rejoining one of the regular reading groups, or being considered able to "stand alone". Labelling can be reduced by having different reading groups going to different rooms at the same time so the Direct Instruction group is only one more group. Interestingly, students appear much less concerned than adults about the potential for labelling - a fear which withdrawal programs sometimes provoke. Usually, once they have begun to experience success, students report that they see themselves as good learners, and hence have no reason to feel ashamed about their withdrawal.

Reading is the basic skill area most often chosen by schools adopting Direct Instruction because it is pivotal to other curriculum areas, and is the first real test of whether a child will be a success in his/her class, or one of the "slowies" to be patronised, or made the butt of jokes.

There are of course other approaches relevant to relieving or preventing failure in the classroom e.g. Reading Recovery etc. When schools are trying to decide which approach is most suited to the needs of their school, they might do worse than examine the literature for research and evaluative studies on the particular approaches which interest them. Decisions based on well-collected data are more likely to repay the investment in time and money required, than are those based on hunch or persuasion. Finally, effective and broadly based evaluation which examines student outcome as one of its emphases, should be an integral part of planning any such school change. Some of the techniques commonly used include parent, student, and teacher(s) questionnaire, brief tape recordings of reading before, and after the program, and formal and informal student reading assessment.

The problems of reading acquisition should be addressed at the preschool and prep levels to prevent the debilitating effects of chronic school failure. However, even if such a welcome state of affairs commenced immediately, schools would still have a cohort of students with the problems described above. It is a matter of social justice that such students do not remain neglected, particularly when there are programs which can have a major, and beneficial, effect on those students unfortunate enough to be in such an invidious situation.