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Teaching children to read in rural environs carries special problems, challenges

A lesson on the cow

By Leonard Breen

"My heavens," you must be thinking, "you mean the state of the art has progressed to the point that there's a special reading program for rural children?" Relax good teachers. It has not. Those who teach in the rural classroom, however, realize that teaching children to read in rural environs does carry some special problems and challenges. Some of these challenges are school related, such as shortages of adequate instructional and library materials, lack of in-service opportunities and a high turnover rate in teaching and administrative personnel. These problems, granted, are real and should be of concern to all of us committed to quality education for rural youth. They are also difficult for us as individual teachers of reading to come to grips with in meaningful ways. The challenges this paper addresses are learner related and, although no less pressing, do carry the hope that there are things we can do Monday morning to help meet them.

There are many different kinds of rural schools and rural children. There is the child of the migrant worker, the child attending school in any of the Indian reservation schools, the mountain child of Tennessee, and the child of small town Kansas, New Mexico or Montana. Each of these groups of children has unique problems. But common to all is their rural-cultural experience. It is this experience which affects the rural child's reading needs and performance.

Reading success is closely related to a child's ability to use the language he is learning to read. It is related also to the varieties and kinds of experiences the reader brings to the task with him. The child's language is indeed an excellent record of his past experiences and level of concept growth. The child with numerous enriching activities in his background is likely to use language which accompanies such experiences. Children who are products of the rural-cultural experience, however, will often have

less facility with language and limited conceptual development because of less adequate opportunities and stimulation. Rural teachers who observe their children closely have often seen how these two factors—language and experience—stand between them and success in learning.

A nine-year-old, fourth-grade boy held up his hand and asked the teacher how to spell if. When the teacher bent over his desk and said "i-f," the boy looked surprised and said, "Oh, I thought it was a four letter word." (Zintz, 1972).

A second-grade class in the mountains of Tennessee is listing and finding pictures of methods of transportation. The students repeatedly lay aside the pictures of airplanes and refuse to add them to their growing list. When queried by the teacher they responded, "sure they fly around, but we're listing things that carry people."

A tenth-grade teacher of business education in rural Montana trying to teach the concept of banking and bank services finds to his surprise that only three of four of his students have ever seen a bank building. None have actually entered one, and most associate the word bank with a jar or baking soda can with a slit in the lid.

We have known, of course, for years how to work best with young children and capitalize on their unique linguistic and experiential backgrounds by using the language experience approach. Because this approach to reading is a total integration of all language abilities, and because children can see how language is represented in print, encoding and decoding activities occur in a context that is meaningful to the child. Additionally, understanding is facilitated in that background for the writing and reading comes from the child's experiences or from experiences that are provided for the activity. In this approach teachers bridge the possibility of a discrepancy between the language experiences of their students and those upon which the reading books are based.

In writing of her methods of working with the Maori children of rural New Zealand, Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1964) holds out a model of the language experience approach for teachers to follow when she writes:

First words must have an intense meaning.

First words must be made of the stuff of the dynamic life.

First books must be made of the stuff of the dynamic life.

First books must be made of the stuff of the child himself, whatever and wherever the child.

In addition to a heavy emphasis on the language experience approach to reading, teachers can aid rural children in reading through the following practices.

1) Do all you can to foster an interest and excitement in words. Let language be the key to learning in your classroom. Words are the stuff of reading and the linguistic labels for growing concepts. Encourage children to talk about the common things that are observed in the world around them—the seasons, weather, food, crops, feelings, etc. Don't let them just get by with, "I'm having an apple for lunch." Encourage them to use descriptive adjectives such as red, yellow, crisp, juicy, sour. Stretch their conceptual boundaries by having them name other fruits which come from the same area. In what ways are apples good for growing boys and girls? Are apples considered fruits or vegetables, and how are the two different from each other?

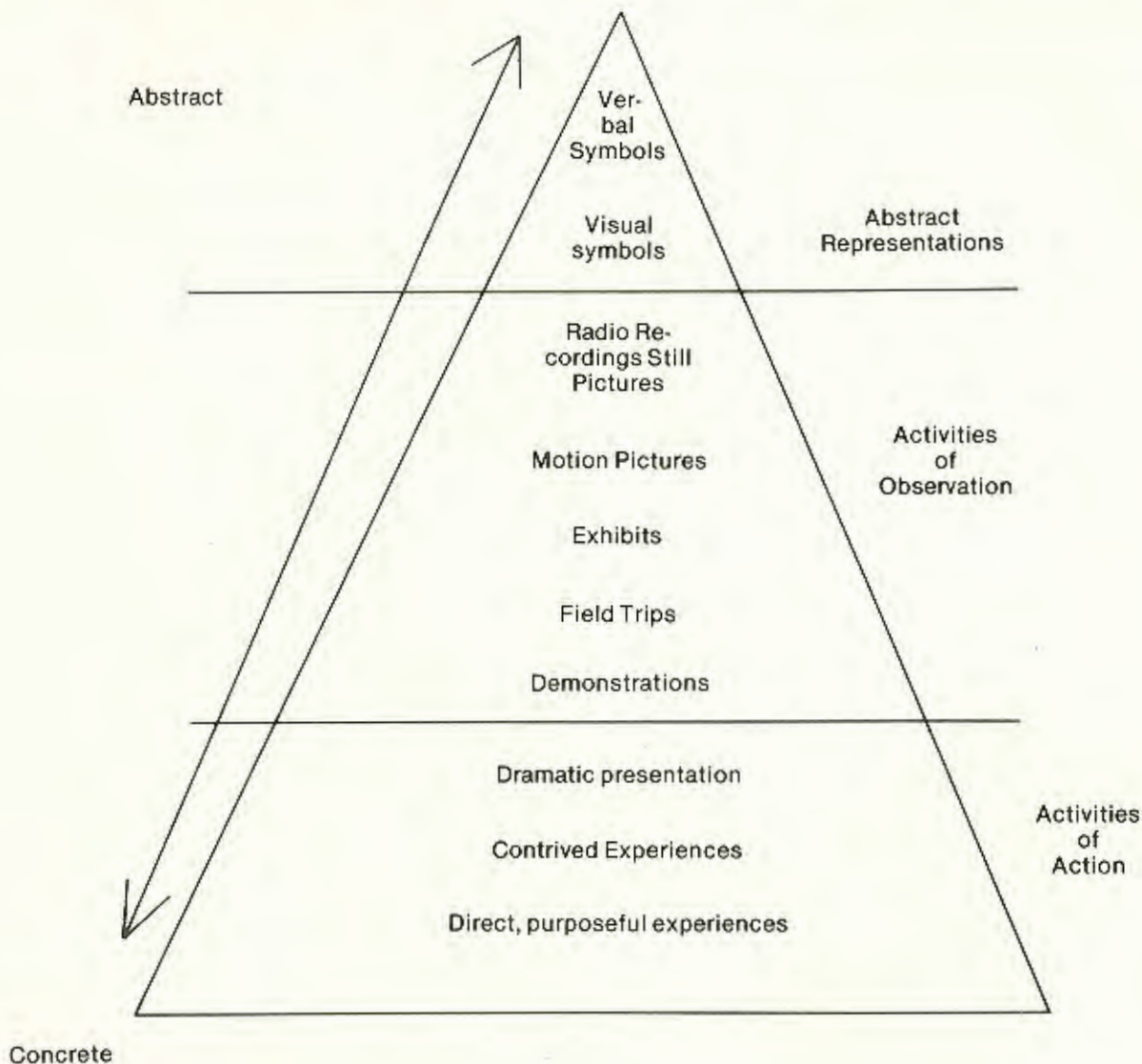
With middle and upper-grade children be alert to words having multiple meanings such as bark, run, bank, etc., and develop activities which expose this array of meanings to them. Help them recognize language used in figurative and idiomatic expressions. Help them become cognizant of and flexible in their use of synonyms, antonyms and appropriate word selections. Try never to let a day go by without using language to predict, to summarize, or share, or to enjoy learnings and feelings. Children retain best the words in print that they can pronounce and commonly use in conversation.

2) Make an effort to read aloud everyday. Somehow in the hustle of the "modern curriculum" this once common practice has gotten shelved for more important things. Yet a more enjoyable way to share the artistry of words and language has not been found. When working with teachers in classes and workshops I often have them identify those activities that most turned them on to reading when they were children. Inevitably oral reading of library books and stories by their teachers is the source of the warmest memories, and the motivation that led them into the classroom adventure of independent reading.

3) Since it's impossible for teachers to eliminate all reading materials which do not, in some way, relate to the rural experiences of their student; and equally impossible to provide only materials written for and related to the experiences of their students; then teachers must carefully select those reading materials which are not completely removed from the background experiences of their students, identify those experiences in the materials which are likely not to be understood by the student and then provide students with those experiences **before** they read.

In planning requisite lesson experiences for their classes teachers need to remember that learning progresses from the concrete to the abstract.

Dale (1969) expressed this hierarchy graphically in a Cone of Experience which identified three levels of activities: activities of action or doing, activities of watching someone else do something, and activities which require interaction with abstract visual and/or verbal symbols.



Requisite learning activities for children with limited conceptual and experiential backgrounds need to be selected from as near the base of the cone as possible. Hands on experiences, making models, participating in role playing, and extensive exposure to pictures and audiovisual aids are all superior to teacher talk, glossary definitions and use of graphic representations in developing new conceptual understandings and readiness for comprehending classroom reading materials.

4) Children who are products of a culturally different environment are in special need of a reading-language curriculum which totally integrates the skills of speaking-listening-writing-reading. Let me suggest an excellent example of the kind of teaching needed by children in the rural school. This excerpt is from a unit taken from a reading methods book published when most schools in America were rural schools. (Arnold, 1899). Here is a reading unit that is language oriented, experience oriented, meaning oriented.

In meeting the reading needs of the child who is a product of the rural-cultural experience, we could do worse than returning to some of the methods of the original rural classroom.

A lesson on the cow

1) Find out what the children know about the cow.

Every new lesson should be built upon and fastened to the children's past experience. If they have no knowledge of cows we must introduce the subject accordingly. If they have always known them the lesson will be merely a review, because the foundation will have been prepared. If the children live in the country and know the common animals, proceed at once to definite questions which will arrange their knowledge and help them to express it:

Where have you seen cows? What do you know about them—their size, color; the head, ears, legs, feet, tail?

How large are they, as compared with the horse, dog, cat?

Compare the covering with that of the horse, dog, cat. Compare the parts with the corresponding parts of those animals.

Describe the horns. Why do cows have horns? What use do they make of them?

Describe the ears. Where are they? Does the cow move them? The ears of the dog, cat, cow, horse are movable; ours are not. Why?

Compare the cow's nose and mouth with those of the cat or the horse.

Does anyone know anything about the cow's teeth? What does she eat? What kind of teeth does she need?

Tell the children about the chewing of the cud.

Of what use to the cow is the long tail with its brush at the end? Who has seen her use it? Would a short tail serve as well?

Who knows something about the cow's foot? Who can draw a picture of a cow's footprint?

Of what use are cows to us? What kind of stall, what kind of bed, what food, water, pasture, should they have? Describe a pasture that you would like if you were a cow. Describe a barn that you would like if you were a cow.

How ought we to treat animals? Is it right to forget their wants when we have the care of them?

Every lesson upon animals should help the children to realize more fully their obligation to properly care for them. Sympathy for animal life ought to be developed through the reading and language lessons. Interest in animal life is always present in children. The questions suggested above cannot be answered at once, by any ordinary class of children. Many who are familiar with cows in general will be unable to answer them definitely. But the questions will lead them to more thoughtful observation, after which they can report in another lesson. Sometimes the subjects may be distributed, different groups of children being held responsible for the answer to a certain question.

2) Direct outside observation, in order to get new knowledge.

It is entirely feasible, in many schoolrooms, to make the study of the cow the subject of a field lesson. The children may be taken, in groups to a farmyard, a pasture, or a stable, where a cow may be observed and studied. Such lessons have ceased to be formidable, since they have become so common. The need of these visits is revealed by the children's vague answers. Nothing but definite observation of the real thing will open their eyes, and make the words in their lesson full of meaning.

There are many city children who have never seen a cow. If it is impossible to take them to a real cow, excellent pictures should be substituted. Many of the questions suggested could be answered by pictures. It must be remembered, however, that the picture tells to us, who have had the real experience, much more than it tells to a child who has never had the experience. It is not strange that a boy who has never seen a real cow should imagine that animal to be six inches long, the size of the cow which he has known from pictures in the lesson. Emphasize the fact of the size. Allude to the picture as a picture only. Have the children show by their hands how high a cow would be, how long, how wide its head, etc. By such means, help to vivify the mental picture which is suggested to the children by the lesson. If the pictures are the only avenue through which they learn about the cow, do not attempt to give as much information as would naturally be associated with the real observation lesson. Remember that the amount of knowledge the child gains is not proportional to the number of facts which the teacher enumerates. He will intelligently appropriate those which his observation and thought have helped him to understand. As has been said before, this truth determines the value of the reading lesson to the child, and necessitates the associated lessons, which supplement his experience and enables him to bring to the lesson a mind furnished with appropriate ideas.

3) Tell the children simple facts which they cannot find out for themselves.

There are many facts associated with the cow which the children can only know through others; the use of the horns, of the bones, the hair, etc.; the manufactures; the reason for the cud chewing; the making of butter and cheese. The writer has known classrooms in which milk was skimmed, the cream churned into butter, and the butter eaten by the children. The quantity, of course, was small, but the process was real and interesting. This happened recently in a kindergarten in a large city. There were only three children in the class who had ever seen a cow. It is hardly necessary to say that the lesson followed a visit to the cow.

4) Reinforce the lessons by stories.

Stories about cows, or descriptions of certain animals, perhaps the pets which we have known, will add interest to the lessons.

5) Collect pictures of cows for comparisons and descriptions.

In almost any district children will be able to help in making collections of pictures which illustrate the language and reading lesson. These pictures can be obtained from newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and various other sources. Every child who helps to swell the collection will feel an added interest in it. The collection will be valuable in proportion as it is carefully arranged and thoughtfully used by the teacher. If the cards are neatly mounted upon separate sheets which contain the name of the contributor, and distributed among the children for observation and comparison, it will prove

really helpful. Through the comparison of the different pictures many facts will be developed, suggested by the children's comments or questions. Such teaching will be sure to fit the need of the children.

These suggestions will be modified and arranged by any teacher who desires to use them. They may help to point the way for those who are not entirely familiar with this phase of their work, and lead to better things.

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