DIAGNOSTIC AND PRESCRIPTIVE TEACHING


At one time or another, every elementary school teacher has been puzzled, frustrated and bedeviled by the enigma of the intelligent child who cannot learn to read, to write and to spell. This very same teacher, caught in a mesh of misunderstandings, cognizant of her own ignorance, has cried out for someone to explain the enigma and to offer guidance for helping the child.

Within the last few years, the concept of Specific Language Disability has become much more widespread and more generally accepted. It is even not unusual for schools of education in teacher training institutions to offer summer school courses on "The Dyslexic Child", or "The Child with Learning Disabilities." In most cases, reference is being made to the same child, the child with specific language disability (here called SLD).

While it is gratifying to note that some hitherto impregnable walls are beginning to crumble, examination of the curriculum leads to the conclusion that most teacher-training colleges are not able to do more than offer study in the theoretical concepts of dyslexia. As yet, they are limited in the guidance that they are able to offer to the teacher who seeks techniques, ways of assisting these disabled children.

A new book has just been released—which will give such guidance, the work by Beth Slingerland for which her friends and students have been anxiously waiting. Mrs. Slingerland's background and training in the multi-sensory approach to teaching are of the highest order. She studied under Anna Gillingham and Bessie Stillman and spent some years working under their guidance. From this rich background of study and experience, Mrs. Slingerland evolved her own adaptation of the techniques, to be used in the classroom with young children. As she worked with children, both as a teacher and as an administrator, she became more and more convinced that the problem was so pervasive a one that the only hope of meeting the need was in the school classroom. The first classroom program was begun in Renton, Washington, ten years ago, and the word about her program of structured learning for SLD children has spread until it is known across the country.

As those of us who have worked with the SLD child know, techniques for remediation and prevention of the disability are not as simple as they sound at first rumble on the ear drum. After ten years, Mrs. Slingerland has finally given in to the importuning of her colleagues and many students and produced this volume, which outlines in detail the first two years of her program for using the multi-sensory techniques in the classroom.
The full richness of this volume is not immediately apparent. Contained within its pages are carefully delineated lessons which can revolutionize classroom teaching methods for the SLD child. The material is as carefully structured and completely outlined as Mrs. Slingerland cautions the teachers themselves to be with their children. Writing explicit, easy-to-understand directions is not the most simple thing one could set out to do, as anyone knows who has ever tried to write directions for a game. In this regard, Mrs. Slingerland has succeeded magnificently. Appearing to be simple, the book is actually a masterpiece of organization and exposition.

Remembering her own introduction to the Slingerland techniques at the Charles Dorsey Armstrong School in Menlo Park, this writer found herself muttering mentally as she read through the book, “But they really ought to take a class!” It is true that studying the techniques in a class and practicing with a child under the watchful eye of an instructor would be a more direct and more satisfactory way of learning. On the other hand, lacking such an opportunity, a devoted and courageous teacher will find it possible to take this book and structure some learning situations for her disability children that will insure their learning to read, write and spell.

The book is divided into two main sections. The first section, the Auditory Approach, begins with explicit lessons on the teaching of manuscript writing to disability children, since this form is generally required in the schools for which the book has been prepared. This leads into work with alphabet cards, key words and other mnemonic aids, blending words together with chart cards, and on into written spelling and independent writing.

The second section, to be used in parallel with the first, is entitled the Visual Approach. Within this section is outlined a careful sequence of activities which leads to independent reading. As those who are familiar with the Gillingham materials already know, these techniques are concerned with a great deal more than decoding skills. Indeed, they are intimately involved with the structure of the language itself, as well as with activities to develop thought, conceptualizing, anticipating, drawing conclusions and all of the many reasons for which people read and write.

That Mrs. Slingerland demonstrates the use of basal readers in the Visual Approach began as a compromise with the necessities met in classrooms in many public school systems where the teachers must use the texts chosen and provided by local and state administration. She has been able to accept this situation and to turn it to her own purposes in developing the children’s independent, structural approach to reading. Doubtless many users of her book will prefer, and be free to use, beginning readers with more linguistically or phonically controlled vocabularies. This adaptation should be possible, for the author has shown, in effect, how to apply her essential principles to the use of any available or mandated reading materials.