READING IN THE DISCIPLINES: A STRATEGIES APPROACH FOR DISABLED READERS

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The assessment of learners in difficulty demands that we examine what sets their learning apart. Is there something in their processing, something in the way they take in information and use it, that differentiates them from other learners? The question does not relate to inadequacy, but to differences in learning strategies and styles.

A problem-solving assessment process is used to examine characteristics which are difficult to identify in standardized testing. Clinically, we are not opposed to standardized testing; we need the information that traditional test structures generate; data are needed for instructional planning; and, systems operation requires pre-post documentation. Before we put children through traditional forms of testing, however, we want to establish the kind of relationship in which they can tolerate being taken to test ceilings, and pushed beyond them.

Some Ground Rules

Problem-solving imposes specific ground rules. FIRST, the focus is on process as well as response. There are many ways to solve a problem, each correct. Solutions may be totally unexpected but, by the same token, both defensible and profound. It's the process of thinking through a problem which is the critical mass, and it's that problem-solving strength that we seek to discover. Children arrive at many answers that diverge from, or extend the logic of, standard responses. If we can teach students to (consciously) use their own strengths, then the probability of getting appropriate (expected) answers is increased.

Second, models for learners-at-risk should start with strategies they use best, even though they may use them to solve problems that are not related to the subject matter at hand. The search, therefore, is for the students' successful thinking processes in areas that may have nothing to do with their academic life. After all, they have been [indirectly] telling us for years that standard methods don't work [for them].

"Strengths" has frequently been used by educators as a euphamism for "modality strength." [Do learners see better, hear better, touch better?] That's not our referent point. We're dealing with linked strategies making it possible for a teen-ager to get up in the morning and put his pants on correctly. What are the problem-solving devices that tell him where his clothes are, how he should get dressed, etc.?

THIRD, task solutions must operate on more than one level of logic. This is particularly true for youngsters who have experienced a great deal of failure, and are likely to give non-standard responses. Single-answer tasks lock that youngster into a learning cage from which there may be no escape. Presenting tasks which have many possibilities, where each answer reveals a different form of thinking, allowins for the structuring of situations (even at the diagnostic stage) in which there is much less likelihood of failure.

FOURTH, we have to set up task series which are hierarchical in nature, that is, each succeeding task should be more and more difficult. We want to be sure that the learner can be proud of finding appropriate solutions to tasks that are intrinsically worth-while. Neither the learner, nor the observers, should think, "Anybody can do that!"

One of the problems with traditional testing is that youngsters in trouble frequently can't even come close to their own grade level. You, and they, know that their test-ceiling is below that of their contemporaries. Therefore, in a problem-solving assessment we hve to select the kinds of tasks which allow us to take children to very high levels of thinking, where they have a sense (and everyone sitting around has a sense) that what they've done is important.

Our objective is to establish a series of procedures which make it possible for students to learn beyond their test ceilings. That is the centrality of the exchange. The way to create advocacy on the part of the observers is to work with materials and tasks that are relevant to school procedures and are of value to the students. The advocates must want to become partners in helping the child succeed at tasks which have long-range school, as well as short-range diagnostic, value.

FIFTH, parents and teachers, and even specialists, rarely have a chance to step back and watch the child at work. They're always the ones working with the youngster, and therefore they rarely have the perspective of the outsider looking at the learner's capabilities. What they do have, is the perspective of insiders with specific teaching objectives. Their commitment is to teaching, and if learning doesn't seem to take place, their frustration is as profound as the child's. In the case of the diagnostic process, their commitment is to observation, while somebody else teaches. The strategies used are replicable and, thus, can be tried (in the classroom and home) at some future date.

Frequently, teachers watching a specialist feel they don't have either the technique or the knowledge to carry out the same procedures. Specialists risk increasing the distance between themselves and those who have ongoing contact with the child—working teachers and parents. In a problem-solving exchange, strategies are selected that others can handle with ease, so there's more likelihood they'll actually be used.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if teacher training included courses like "Marketing" or "Motivational Research"? If we wanted to sell Corn Flakes, we would use models who liked Corn Flakes. Who needs an actor who'd tell us what's wrong with Corn Flakes every time they were mentioned? So, part of the issue of developing child advocacy (the SIXTH ground rule) is for the observers to agree on some positive elements about that child before the diagnostic exchange begins. Thus, we open a session with the question, "What's right about your child? Tell me what he or she does well." The answers help establish a mutually-agreed upon body of information related to specific acts.

It's not just a general, "I like children." It is, "I like THIS behavior in THIS child." For example, I like the way Mary starts her work (in school) right away," or, "I like the fact that John is always willing to help throw the garbage out (at home." Now we have a mutually agreed-upon, positive, valence. All too often, traditional diagnostic sessions (even the interview) focus on symptoms and negative learning characteristics. It is difficult to avoid negative test and performance expectations when stress, even though well intentioned, is the major initiator of the assessment process.

SEVENTH, there will be children who have difficulty no matter how carefully we structure the presentation of tasks. In a problem-solving process, where the guarantee is on success, we have to build contingency plans. What will we do if the youngster doesn't make it first crack out of the barrel? Obviously, we can't predict what we're going to find for every child. But we have to make educated guesses about the patterns displayed by learners in difficulty, so that we're prepared to step in when they experience frustration, or wander off course.

Problem-Solving Tasks

Students in difficulty often display extreme patterns. We all share learning strategies and characteristics, working along a continuum of learning. But, learners in trouble tend to polarize their behaviors—behaviors which are usually aphorized. People tend to call learners at one extreme "stubborn," and, at the other, "lazy" or "underachievers."

Beyond the appropriateness of student behavior, the question of learning characteristics is related to the production means by which we expect learners to output information. It has been the experience of most clinicians that children are often mis-identified or mis-labeled as a consequence of their responses to standardized questions, without much concern for the thinking processes that produced those answers. It is all too easy to decide that a youngster's problems lie in the realm of content, when answers seem bizarre or inappropriate.

In truth, however, many vulnerable learners function so uniquely that they defy standard categorization. They "see" dimensions to a problem that are hidden from examiners, teachers and parents; they utilize logic which may be foreign to the observing adults; they cannot cope with expected output systems, even when they are fully capable of understanding and processing the content of required subject areas.

One of the most revealing exercises in our problem-solving process involves an answer to the following task:

Instruction: Fill in the blanks in the problem.

Problem: P A T P E T P I T P — — — — —

Most adults, and just about every teacher who has ever looked at the problem answers in the following manner: P O T P U T. Indeed, failure to do so would usually be attributed to a child's difficulty with language or unfamiliarity with the vowels. Under actual test conditions, however, over half the students have responded with totally different, and totally correct responses.

The most common alternate is: P A T   P E T   P I T P M T   P Q T. Almost every observing adult assumes that the answer is random and incorrect. Some problem solvers, however, notice that there are three intermediate letters between "A", "E", and "I". Mathematical logic, therefore, dictates a continuation of the pattern. Hence, "M" and "Q". If the problem is only to identify vowels the answer is inappropriate. If it's to fill in the blanks, the answer is not only appropriate, but indicates a preference for mathematical, over language-based, thinking.

And that's only scratching the surface.

What about the answer: P A T   P E T   P I T   P I G P I N, or P A T   P E T   P I T   P A N   P E N? Who says we have to use all the vowels?

Unfortunately, a standard language or reading test calling for the initial solution would give a negative score to the

"legitimate" variations displayed above (and there are many more possibilities). It's not the content, but the expected referent, or output process which tends to confuse many unique learners.

If only we could remove the youngster's concern about HOW to do things, how to output them, they could concentrate on content. The issue is how clearly we structure the pattern by which we expect learers to respond. If we give them clear patterns, or if we allow for more than one appropriate answer, then there's room for problem-solving.

One of the greatest tragedies confronting unique learners is the lack of positive feedback for their strengths. They have usually accumulated a large supply of negatives for wrong answers and inappropriate behaviors. They work out of their weaknesses and can quote, chapter and verse, from long [internal] lists of failures. To complicate matters further, many of their strengths seem unrelated to school needs (i.e., sports, the arts, human relations, etc.). They are often grouped with similar students, although they may prefer independent work and long stretches of contemplation or isolation. They are given answers too soon, or presented with easier problems to solve, thus intensifying feelings of low self esteem and inadequate intellect.

In short, they are not trusted to carry out the serious [and joyful] business of learning. Most critically, they are not given credit for solid thinking, sometimes verging on the profound— usually, because their methods of attack and selections of strategy are so unique that they are overlooked by others.

The function of the problem-solving process is to identify their strengths and teach them to transfer those strengths to areas of learning and development that currently constitute their areas of failure. The demands on unique learners should not be reduced. Rather, our recognition of their capabilities must be increased.

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