

THE TOLLESON SIX SCHOOL READING PROJECT A REVOLUTIONARY APPROACH

by GRACE A. BLOSSOM

Last school year Tolleson Union High School, Tolleson, Arizona, and the five elementary schools that surround it, put into practice a revolutionary approach to help all students read on or above grade level. It required no new texts, no highly specialized teacher training and very little cash outlay. Stated in its simplest terms the teachers were asked to accept the following concepts:

1. That the English language, itself, not racial origin or economic conditions is the cause of reading retardation in the upper grades.

2. That a shift from the use of conversational English to literary English or non-conversational English takes place in the text books at about the fourth grade level.

3. That every teacher of academic subjects, not just the reading teacher, must help students cope with the language of that subject.

4. That regular grade level texts be used in place of high interest, low vocabulary level materials. In other words, bring the student up to the text rather than the material down to the student.

Starting with these four points as the underlying philosophy of the new approach the teachers were asked to do the following:

1. Prepare a glossary or little dictionary of the terms deemed difficult in each day's lesson.

2. Define the selected terms in the simplest English possible giving only a definition for the item as it is used in the text.

3. Give each student in the class a copy of the glossary for the day's lesson and spend a few minutes of class time pronouncing each entry item and noting the meaning. This procedure was kept to a maximum of ten minutes of class time.

When the year finished and we looked at the results of the pilot project we realized how successful it had been. On the high

school level the entire freshman class had averaged two years six months gain in reading comprehension as measured by Gates MacGinitie Reading Tests. But there were other results that we believe were even more important:

1. The daily glossary sheets seemed to identify the problem as being the difficultness of the English language rather than student stupidity.

2. They also seemed, as Mr. Tim Prichard of Fowler Elementary School remarked, concrete evidence of the teacher's willingness to help.

3. By identifying the "adversary" as the English language student self image was improved.

4. We had fewer discipline problems and fewer drop outs.

5. By keeping all freshman students informed as to their progress in improving their reading ability in terms they could fully understand, we seemed to develop a better teacher-student relationship.

While the preparation of a glossary sheet for each lesson from the text is time consuming the teachers knew that next year it would be only a matter of reproducing the sheets for further use. An interesting side effect of the writing of glossary material was the increased awareness on the part of the teacher of the difficulty of the text. It was not at all uncommon for a teacher to remark, "I never realized how difficult this book is." While we started out to help the bilingual students we found that English speaking students made the greatest gain in reading comprehension with the native bilinguals close behind. The few students who came in from Mexico made the least gain.

A more complete report including the computerized results of the student and teacher questionnaire may be had upon request from Dr. Weldon P. Shofstall, Superintendent of Public Education, State Department, Phoenix, Arizona.