

II. PROMOTING THE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATIONALLY SUBNORMAL CHILDREN

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In planning the teaching of any school subject, it is essential to examine it — to decide what it is and what purposes it serves. Language, of course, is not a subject (although it sometimes gets constricted within the bounds of English and sometimes artificially split up into reading, writing, spelling, composition, English exercises). It is a factor in the learning of every phase of school activity; in some measure, it is involved in every aspect of a child's growth. It is more than the acquisition of words into a vocabulary or the deployment of words in the expression of ideas. It involves more than concept formation; for language is also concerned with the expression and communication of feelings. It is necessary to consider which aspects of language growth we most need to take into account in planning a programme of language development.

In the first place, language skills — listening, comprehending, explaining, asking, conversing — have obvious social values. In some measure (and certainly not completely) pupils will be judged by their fellows at work and in leisure, by employers and foremen, by their ability to understand when spoken to and by their ability to talk, explain, carry messages, and ask questions when needed. Certainly many difficulties in social situations will be *created* if leavers are unable to understand instructions and explanations. Many difficulties in social and work situations could be *avoided* if pupils have adequate means of communicating their point of view and are accustomed in some measure to try verbal means of solving disagreements. The ability to converse and to share ideas and experiences is likely to be a factor in forming friendships or at least to facilitate social contacts in clubs and other leisure situations. The extent to which these social values are validly claimed is difficult to assess objectively. But observation of pupils who have left school (especially those who have experienced difficulty) and also our knowledge of the importance of language for normal social development in childhood point to the value of verbal abilities in social situations.

In the second place, language is important for emotional education and re-education. One of the reasons why ESN children have not received much attention from child guidance personnel is undoubtedly the language barrier. But my purpose in referring to emotional education is not so much to refer to psychotherapy as to stress that one aspect of language teaching is concerned with the education of the emotions. That this is so is obvious with normal children. Literature — whether we are referring to the literature of the nursery (nursery rhymes, fairy tales), the lore and language of primary school children or the literature studied in the secondary school — is one of the means of providing children with vicarious means of experiencing human emotions and motives, and of growing in understanding of words referring to emotional life. English in school is a means of learning to express and come to terms with these human emotional experiences. This is an aspect of English which too often gets lost within the pages of workbooks and comprehension exercises or is smothered by efforts to attain correct oral and written forms. The use of English is an expressive activity. This is one aspect which needs further thought and experiment.

A third reason for the current interest in language arises from the sharpened awareness of the significance of language for mental functioning. The dichotomy

between verbal and practical abilities cannot be so certainly maintained. The work of Piaget and others has provoked discussion of the interdependence of thinking and language, of operations and words. The notion that the concepts represented by words enables us to interpret and order our experience has given us an insight into the intellectual limitations of subnormal children which has implications for their education and for their adjustment to the problems of living. At the same time, current ideas about the nature and development of intelligent behaviour enables us to conceive the possibility of change in the rate and differentiation of mental growth in response to planned learning or more stimulating experiences. That this can be so has been demonstrated in several investigations (Kirk 9; Tizard 27). Since a proportion of ESN children have had impoverished verbal experience, language is an obvious point at which to direct special attention.

The final reason for giving ample attention to language is that it is, perforce, the commonest medium of education. However much we can educate by social and group influences, by example, training, practical experiences and the use of visual material, there remains much which cannot be done without verbal means. Even the simplest learning with dull children stumbles over the problem of words and their meanings. Even a curriculum which has been stripped of inessentials in order to reflect the basic demands and activities of living must include a wide range of vocabulary and practical concepts.

Our aims then in language teaching are:—

- 1, to facilitate social relationships of many kinds.
- 2, to assist emotional growth.
- 3, to improve mental functioning.
- 4, to develop the verbal abilities upon which so much of school learning must depend.

Clearly, what is done in school to promote language growth will depend in some measure on the view which is taken of the relative importance of these different uses of language. Perhaps the commonest way of looking at language in school has been to recognise its contribution to other learning. For example, reading has been seen as part of and dependent upon general language development, first in relation to the readiness for reading stage, later in supporting word recognition skills with meaning and later as a factor in reading with good comprehension. More recently, the verbal aspects of arithmetic teaching have been more fully appreciated—first in relation to the understanding of basic number concepts; later as a factor in comprehending arithmetical problems in real life situations.

The contribution of language skills for social development has been appreciated but rather more in the education of young children. For example, with older children there is still a tendency to over-value written work rather than the need for informal and directed practice in talking, conversing and discussing.

Least explored in the education of backward children is language as a means of emotional education. When we think of the emotional development of backward children our minds turn to such topics as teacher-pupils relationships, school atmosphere and discipline, the role of creative activities such as drama, art, dance. There are, however, eloquent exponents of the view that even with backward pupils emotional maturity can be promoted by means of literature and verbal expression with a personal and imaginative content (Holbrook, 8).

The nature of the problem

The verbal retardation of educationally subnormal children is manifested first of all in their limited vocabulary. They often lack words for quite common things, events and experiences, showing the effect of both a restricted range of experience and

limited opportunities for verbal experience at home. Their knowledge of words is often vague and imprecise, and as vocabulary testing shows, their understanding tends to be concrete and particular rather than abstract and general.

The teacher of ESN children needs to be, therefore, very conscious of vocabulary — of the words he is using and the words which his pupils are likely to know. It is easy for an educated adult to assume mistakenly that common words are known by ESN children. To support the teacher's everyday observation of children's comprehension and use of words, it is useful to have some familiarity with the results of vocabulary studies in order to increase the appreciation of the words of greatest frequency and usefulness. There are numerous studies of the frequency of words in reading matter (Thorndike, Gates, Dolch, Dale) and several studies of the speech vocabularies of children (Burroughs, 2; Vernon, 28) and of the subnormal (Mein, 13; Scriven, 26). (In addition, it is, of course, a useful exercise for teachers to give a vocabulary test to at least a few children, e.g., Watts Vocabulary Test for Young Children; Crichton Vocabulary Scale for Older Children). On the one hand this knowledge should help the teacher to keep communication within the word comprehension of pupils, and on the other hand to be aware of words which may need more explanation and the support of a meaningful context.

It is, of course, important to recognise that word lists based on frequency in reading matter or in the speech of normal children have only a certain amount of value. It is also important to know what words are needed for essential school learning and what words are going to be needed in post-school life.

It is also important to note that several different kinds of vocabulary can be distinguished, in particular, that there are speech and meaning vocabularies. Children may understand some words that they never use in speech; some words that they use in speech may not be really known or only imperfectly understood. It is, of course, a universal human problem in communication that we have private and often quite inadequate concepts for many words we habitually use. The problem of acquiring vocabulary is not simply one of hearing words often enough and being able to retain them and speak them. Vocabulary growth is intimately related to the maturity of thinking and concept formation. The situation of the subnormal is similar to that of the pre-school child who uses many words without really *knowing* them — *year, thousand, because, good, etc.* Vocabulary growth is a process of continually enlarging and enriching meanings as well as introducing new words.

In thinking of vocabulary, there is a tendency to think first of nouns and verbs, whereas some of the most marked difficulties of educationally subnormal children are in words relating to relationships of various kinds. Renfrew (18) refers to misunderstandings about prepositions and adverbs — *beside, underneath, along*. Comparatives and superlatives are acquired late and benefit from special attention in teaching. With older ESN children, words referring to relationships continue to cause difficulty — *alike, the same, more, few, all, some, together with*. It is now widely appreciated that the difficulty of ESN children with arithmetic is partly one of understanding the vocabulary for arithmetical relationships and processes. Several studies of the spoken expression of ESN children have pointed out that adverbial conjunctions are rarely used — *if, until, so that, etc.* (Gulliford, 7). In general words which refer to abstractions rather than to the concrete are difficult to acquire and are rarely used.

This limited repertoire of words and common phrases is a major factor in the subnormal's poor verbal expression. In speech, he often halts, and failing to find a word, starts again. Expression is often eked out by gestures; gaps in expression are filled in by phrases such as "Whats it?", "That thing," "You know." It is charac-

teristic that ideas are strung together as phrases or as simple sentences without conjunctions or with the same few conjunctions — *and, then, so*. As with young children, there is difficulty in selection of what to say and in putting the content in logical order. Enunciation is often poor with ends of words tailing off or eliding into the next. Delivery may be halting, or mumbled. All these characteristics point to the need in school for informal talk and for guided discussion so that children gain practice in finding ways of thinking what to say and how to say it.

The causes of language retardation

Our understanding of the reasons for the verbal retardation of backward children has been deepened in recent years. We do not for example see it as a simple by-product of a slower rate of intellectual maturation or as a lack of an innate verbal component of intelligence. Rather we view it as the product of poor abilities in thinking which depend not only on inborn limitations but also on impoverished cultural experiences and a reduced response to the environment (Pringle and Bossio; Pringle and Tanner). That is, we recognise the contribution of experiential and motivational factors as well as maturational ones. The implication of this is that we need to consider what can be done to improve the quality of education, and whether directed efforts in school to improve the quality of thinking and to stimulate a more active response to the environment may produce desirable results. We could do with experimental teaching to discover whether thinking and conceptual development could be improved; whether reasoning, classification, the ability to draw conclusions and inferences could in any degree be taught. This is perhaps not such a novel idea as it may sound since this is already done in some aspects of school work — reading for comprehension, arithmetic (if taught in a meaningful way), nature study and elementary science and so on.

Another aspect in which we realise more clearly the dimensions of the problem is the social influence determining language. We have long talked about the limited verbal background of subnormal children and the poor models of speech at home. We have perhaps tended to think of the teaching problem as being one of replacing bad speech habits with better ones rather as one might fit out an ill-clad pupil with a new suit of clothes. The social psychologists have stopped us from looking at the matter in quite that simple way. For example, the recent articles by Bernstein (1) bring this out clearly.

Bernstein distinguishes between the language usage of the working class and the middle class, or between "public" language and "formal" language. Public language is characterised by a limited use of sentence forms, and of parts of speech and other devices to qualify and elaborate meanings. It is a language of implicit meaning. Formal language, the language of the educated, on the other hand, fully utilises the formal possibilities of language (grammar, sentence structure, variety of parts of speech) to clarify meaning and make it explicit. Bernstein considers these two forms of language use are determined by the attitudes and orientations of the groups which manifest them. The significance of his theory for the promotion of language growth in backward children is its suggestion that we are attempting not simply to promote linguistic development but rather linguistic change, i.e., putting it in simple terms, that it is not merely a question of developing vocabulary and techniques of verbal expression but of inducing a basic change in the way of responding to experience and interpreting it in language. For the middle class child brought up from his early childhood in an environment controlled and interpreted by people who use formal language, English in school is merely a continuation of his linguistic development. For the child reared in a public language situation, English in school is not a continuation but something new. Bernstein's detailed account of the characteristics of public language show a remarkable similarity with the previously

reported summaries of the deficiencies in the spoken language of subnormal pupils — the limited use of adjectives, adverbs and prepositions, the reliance on simple sentences and the tendency to string words and ideas together without recognisable sentence structure, the use of gestures and repetitive phrases (3, 7). The hypothesis that these characteristic verbal deficiencies are determined by social class rather than by low levels of intelligence is an important one to consider. On the one hand, its acceptance could have a sobering effect on over-optimistic expectation for language work in school in as much as it means that we are concerned with attitudinal *change* rather than merely linguistic *development*. On the other hand, the hypothesis has a salutary effect in emphasising the fact that English in school is not simply a matter of instruction in the conventional sense. It is dependent upon the kinds of experience available to the child and the ways he is stimulated to observe and interpret that experience. It also depends upon personality factors — the child's attitude to himself and to others; the emotional and social relationships which determine his response to environment. In brief, the promotion of language development is as wide as the curriculum and purposes of the school. It is clearly important that a start should be made as early as possible in the child's school life in effecting that change.

At the Primary Stage

At the primary stage of schooling for backward children, there are many mental developments which are necessary precursors of future educational work. At this stage of readiness for learning, we can isolate social, motor, perceptual and conceptual aspects of readiness. Each of these areas has something to offer for language growth.

The importance of social development for language has already been referred to. Many children in the youngest classes have not yet learned to be one of a group. Lacking co-operation in play and other activities they lack both the need and the stimulus for verbal interchange with others. Some have not begun to learn to share and to take turns, to conform to simple routines; many need help with dressing, cleanliness and other aspects of social training. The language associated with these aspects of training may only be partly understood, e.g., words related to the idea of sharing and taking turns; prepositions and verbs needed for following simple instructions. Activities promoting visual and auditory discrimination also contribute to verbal growth, in some instances contributing words and concepts which are relevant to later work in reading and arithmetic — *different, alike, same*; words relating to *colour, size, shape, amount*. Listening, the auditory counterpart of looking, is an important skill to be developed. In addition to the training in listening from hearing stories, there is a place for discriminating sounds in more general ways—mechanical and animal noises, high and low sounds, different musical sounds and rhythms. Repeating nursery rhymes and jingles and singing simple songs with repetitive words play a part in arousing response to words as well as having an effect on speech fluency and enunciation. All these are developments which occur in the normal course of experience for many normal children but which cannot be assumed to occur with subnormal children.

Abilities in listening to speech, comprehending it and formulating verbal responses are often scarcely developed in these younger ESN children. There may be reluctance to use words, and confusions about words which we normally take for granted as commonly understood. These characteristics are well discussed in articles by Renfrew (18), a speech therapist who co-operated with the teacher of a class of young ESN children in special sessions designed to improve speech. After considerable experience of giving speech therapy to ESN children she came to realise that the problem was not simply one of improving articulation but of making

the children more articulate, i.e., of their having things to say, wanting to say them and knowing better how to say them. The reluctance to use words is in some cases emotional in origin — apathy, lack of drive, withdrawal, fear of failure. It is also associated with limited abilities in observing and thinking about experience — lack of the spontaneous exploration and investigation which is so characteristic of average children.

The practical implications for the classroom are (1) the need for a breadth of experience and a range of stimulating activities which will provide both something to talk about and stimulate the desire to talk about it, (2) the need to take every opportunity of guiding children's thinking about their experience and promoting discussion of it. The question of what kinds of experience should be emphasised is one which arises at every stage of schooling. At this primary school stage, Goldstein (5) suggests that social studies might be thought of as a series of concentric circles, each widening ring representing a widening of the child's world. At the centre is the child himself who first perceives outer events only in relationship to himself. The second wider ring represents the world of the immediate community — school, friends, neighbours, shops, etc. Other rings represent the wider environment which increasingly needs to be broached with older children. The need to start from very immediate experiences — many of which we would take for granted with ordinary infant-age children — is also stressed by Renfrew. She argues that children in the younger classes are still psychologically at the stage at which the normal child would be at home learning from the events and outings of a day with mother — cooking, shopping, cleaning, etc. In the special work she undertook, attempts were made to provide children with such experiences appropriate to their delayed stage of mental development. In addition to the usual materials for provoking make-believe domestic play, there was the need for walks outside school to talk about shops and the ordinary events taking place in the neighbourhood. Such activities can readily be supplemented by the use of pre-reading books which are commonly based on such themes and will thus lead up to the beginnings of reading. Likewise, some of this language work will be preparatory to the beginnings of number work.

At the secondary stage

With junior ESN children, their lack of reading and writing attainments necessitates a fair amount of oral work. With older children, opportunities for practising the speaking of the mother tongue can easily be squeezed out by the emphasis on reading and writing, particularly the latter. As innumerable writers have pointed out, skill in using the mother tongue is acquired chiefly by practice in the use of the mother tongue. There are three ways of providing this practice. First, there is the practice which arises naturally in schools where children are encouraged to talk, where the teacher-pupil relationships are similar to those between parents and children in a good home. An atmosphere in which this can occur is an informal, un-critical, encouraging one. Secondly, there are various activities which provide opportunities for practice in expression — lecturettes, puppetry, story telling, mock interviews, tape-recording spontaneous or prepared accounts of stories or events, quizzes, discussions, etc. There are many suggestions for what is commonly called Oral English in teachers' guides (e.g., in *Fluent Writing and Speaking*: Hemming; *English in the Modern School*: Smith, A. E.). These are not without value but they may be rather *in vacuo*, unrelated to any overall plan of curriculum development. Thirdly, there are the opportunities for extending vocabulary and techniques of expression which occur within a well conceived curriculum. In Britain, we tend to conceive the curriculum in terms of the subjects which occur on the typical timetable. A few people break away from this and think in terms of areas of knowledge or experience, using the terms project,

centre of interest or as the Americans would say, the unit of experience. There are many advantages of this method for backward children. The project focusses on an area of experience and, well-handled, results in some well-developed understanding of that area. Projects usually provide what most backward children need — the experiences of visits, school journeys, visual and other aids. Discussion is involved in planning what to do and in interpreting, explaining and summarising what has been seen or done. Learning is reinforced by the use of a variety of forms of recording and expression—model-making, art, talk, written work. Something of this nature, whether it is called a project or not, is the way that vocabulary is developed through the growth of meaningful concepts. Techniques of expression are given maximum opportunities for practice.

The crucial question to ask — whether we are thinking in terms of conventional subject areas or of units of experience — is *What aspects of experience are most necessary for inclusion in the scheme of work?* One way of answering that is to be found in the Illinois Curriculum Guide (6), prepared by Goldstein and Seigle for Illinois special classes. They set out to determine which aspects of living (which they term Life Functions) ought to form the framework of the curriculum. They have settled for ten Life Functions: Citizenship, Communicating, Home and Family, Occupational Adequacy, Physical and Mental Health, Safety, Social Adjustment, Travel. Each of these Life Functions are further analysed into subsidiary objectives, and schemes of activities are outlined (as suggestions and guidance only) for classes at primary, intermediate and advanced levels. These activities are drawn from four main areas — language arts, arithmetic, unit activities, fine and practical arts.

It is not suggested that this particular curriculum guide could be transported to the English setting. The idea behind it could be. It applies to the curriculum the criterion of *functional value in post-school life* in a thoroughgoing fashion. The concepts of Life Functions focusses attention on the main areas of living and should lead therefore to an analysis of what concepts, words, reading, talking and writing skills are required in each area. This principle has been applied in some aspects of British special education — for example, in pruning the arithmetic curriculum, in the work that is done in vocational preparation and in home making, and to some extent over the whole field; but the Illinois Curriculum Guide suggests that the process could be carried further. One advantage of the Curriculum is that key concepts are emphasised by being referred to in connection with different life functions — for example, time concepts are referred to under each life function, their practical application being listed. Another advantage is that for each Life Function topics are listed for discussion and relevant uses of reading, speaking and writing are suggested. In addition, Communicating is considered in a special section. In other words, the contribution of language to the different areas is made explicit and purposeful.

One of the problems in teaching many of the topics is the lack of reading material of a suitable level of difficulty for ESN children. The need for reading series for older backward children has partly been met but it is not easy to find information books, social studies books and other materials suitable for use in a curriculum which emphasises social learning. Although the emphasis in this account has been on spoken language, it is obvious that simply written books dealing with employment, leisure, travel, family and home, safety, the use of money, behaviour and personal appearance would be of great assistance in reinforcing through reading what had been discussed in class. Moreover, writing activities using simple work-books would have a useful place. While reading and writing should not be limited to these topics (see below) it would certainly be economical and make for more efficient learning to have reading and writing integrated in this way with the main areas

of the curriculum. Something of this sort is, of course, already done by means of school-produced booklets.

Although the word "functional" is being stressed, this does not mean a narrow utilitarian approach. We are not concerned only with practical topics such as discussion of the environment—the conditions of working life, budgeting, leisure—nor in written expression are we only concerned with being able to write a simple letter, form filling, etc. English takes its place alongside other expressive activities in school as a means whereby pupils can, in some measure, explore their own feelings about themselves and other people, and if only at a simple level, their feelings about life itself. Just as drawing and painting, and dramatic and imaginative play are expressions of the way a child perceives the world and how he reacts emotionally to his experience, so English work can afford similar opportunities, for example, in the expression of wish-fulfilment and fantasy. Stories and accounts of real-life people should provide vicarious experience of human emotions and situations and should familiarise children with some of the words and expressions used to describe them. Moreover, such stories and accounts offer subjects for hero-worship and identifications (8).

Summary

It is suggested that every aspect of school experience should be examined for its potential contribution to the promotion of language development. Language growth should not be considered a separate part of the educational programme but should be integrated with the whole conception of the curriculum. In teaching for language development, we are concerned with influencing the way children respond to experience and the way they use language to interpret it.

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