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Our Class

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by Alice Mick and Karen Wolff

The name of this unit, "Our Class," is a statement of perspectives: our investment as teachers in a class we have created and wish to further develop, and our specific goal for students -a sense of ownership of their own learning experience.

During the past two academic years we have team-taught a class for students who read well below grade level, have difficulty expressing themselves coherently—or at all—in writing, and who have little or no experience in orally articulating their feelings, thoughts, and ideas in an academic setting. The way we teach this class, and the unit we will write about it, reflect our view that classroom environment and curriculum content need to be consciously integrated. By classroom environment we mean a general recognition of the effects of how and why students interact with each other and with the teachers. By curriculum content we mean the specific reading, writing and conversation topics used both to expand the students' skills and involve them in the class.

Within the class we have goals for individual students and goals for the teachers. For the students we would hope to see an improvement in reading, writing, and oral communication skills and an overall growth in self-confidence and ability to learn in a school environment. For the teachers the goals are to promote a cooperative non-competitive atmosphere, to act as facilitators of learning rather than disseminators of information, and to encourage risk- taking so that mistakes are accepted as a normal and essential part of learning. This overall structure is designed to support freedom of thought and expression within the limits of clearly structured, non- threatening assignments.

This curriculum unit will be divided into three sections. In the first section we will discuss our view of learning and place it in a larger social and educational framework. In the second section of the unit, which forms the main part of the paper, we will describe and explain in detail the structure, environment, and curriculum content of "Our Class" as it presently exists. The third part of the unit will explain our method of choosing and using reading materials. It will introduce a group of stories not previously used in the class and include several sample lesson plans.

I. *Our View of Learning and its Place in a Social and Educational Framework*

Learning as Process

We believe that learning is an integrating process through which the individual moves toward greater self-awareness and a greater aware **ness of** the surrounding world. People are constantly changing physi **cally** and mentally. What is to be learned changes as does the importance and usefulness of what has already been learned.

Learning is a result of the interaction between the individual and the surrounding environment. The individual chooses what to learn ant how to learn it. He or she also chooses how it will be integrated into his or her awareness. The product of this process is the individual consciousness. Our goal in teaching is to help students take more conscious control of their learning, and we see language skills as a powerful and fundamental part of this process.

Language as Dynamic Process

Language is extremely powerful. It both defines reality and is defined by it. It is a dynamic creative process which is constantly changing, a social activity which derives its meaning, from interaction. Personal reality is grasped and worked with through language. The ability to express one's personal reality in words gives one the ability to externalize one's thoughts and then reintegrate them again internally in different ways so that they can be used more consciously.

This interactive dialectical view of language reflects our ideological perspective which reacts against two major traditions in the analysis of language and the relationship between language and reality. Idealists define language as a realization of ideal forms or essences. Objectivists see it as a symbolic representation of the physical world. Both, however, see the development of language as based on certain preconditions external to the relationship between language and the knower. Language is viewed as static, not dynamic.

Our perspective views human intellectual development as a product of the constant interaction between the individual and his or her environment. Thought and language are inseparable. Language is that aspect of the developmental process called social reality to which thought is applied and against which it reacts and develops or expands. Language then becomes a focal point for individual human development.

Teaching as a Process

We have applied this perspective to our teaching. We see learning as a process through which all members of the group or class expand and develop their consciousness together, individually and socially. The social context of learning is constantly worked with consciously. By social context we include the relationship among the members of the group, the relationship between the individual and the subject matter, and the relationship between the group and the subject materials.

The dynamic of this process is determined by the participants. As stated above, we see learning as an interactive process in which we see ourselves, the teachers, supplying some input but not controlling the output. As the material is worked with, its meaning changes. The students too change as they interact with the material. Individuals learn differently because they have varied experiences, expectations and needs.

It is the *relationship* between word and reality, thought and language, and the individual and society which

produces learning. It is then with this emphasis that we have designed our course and work.

' *The Hierarchical View of Learning*

Although our methods evolved out of our practice, through trial and error, we have come to understand them also as a reaction against one widely accepted and traditional perspective on education and learning. Not all individuals who work in schools share this traditional perspective, and indeed, there have been many other trends in American educational theory. However, we do believe that the description which follows outlines, in its most basic form, the assumptions from which most current educational practice has evolved.

Most schools are hierarchically structured. The head of the school is the administrator responsible for the correct running of the school. Teachers are expected to teach students largely prescribed curricula. The learning of the student is measured quantitatively. A good teacher is supposed to produce good students, those who can accumulate an appropriate amount of prescribed information. This prescribed information is called knowledge. Intelligence then can also be quantitatively measured, for the local conclusion is that the person who accumulates the largest amount of knowledge is the most intelligent.

There are two assumptions fundamental to this perspective: 1) that since knowledge is quantifiable, it is objective; 2) that since learning takes place within a hierarchical structure in which the teacher teaches and the student learns, all or at least most knowledge to be learned is already known.

What this overlooks is the process of learning, the interactions between the student and the body of material to be learned or understood. This separation of the student from his or her learning process tends to produce passive and docile students.

Our Goals

We believe that students should take conscious control of their learning. We promote this by allowing for and encouraging differences between people and by creating an atmosphere of dynamic change and interaction in the classroom. Though there are clearly defined rules about how to treat people with respect, there cannot be rules for how people will expand their consciousness.

We feel that language and literacy are fundamental components of this view of learning. Literacy opens up new forms of knowledge and can give a new motive for action in life. It gives the student a greater potential for access into our technological society and greater control over how he decides to deal with his life. These skills open up new options. They allow for greater control and involvement in society also.

An Annotated Bibliography

Bion, W.R. *Experiences in Groups* . New York: Ballantine Book; 1954.

This is a classical introduction to group work and group dynamics. The author concentrates on the influence of leadership on the group process.

Bols, Samuel and Herbert Gintis. *Schooling in Capitalist America* . New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1976.

Bols and Gintis analyze the evolution of the American education system and its effect on social mobility. They challenge the basic

assumptions underlying schooling in American and show that social mobility is more apparent than real.

Bowers, C.A. *Cultural Literacy for Freedom* . Eugene, Oregon: Elan Publishers, Inc., 1974.

The author has an existential interpretation of learning and teaching which he applies to a theory of socialization. He feels that learning must enable people to make an impact on our culture. He challenges the assumptions of our educational system.

Brown, Cynthia. *Literacy in 30 Hours.* London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1975.

This is a detailed description of Paulo Freiere's method of teaching literacy to Brazilian peasants.

Freiere, Paulo. Education for Critical Consciousness. New York The Seabury Press, 1973.

_____. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Herder and Herder, 1968.

_____. Pedagogy in Process. New York: The Seabury Press, 1978.

Freiere is an educator who taught literacy in Brazil until he was forced into exile. He sees learning as an interactive process between the learner and the material being learned and asserts that literacy is a political act.

Ginsburg, Herbert and Sylvia Opper. Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969.

This is an introduction, description and discussion of Piaget's theory.

Glasser, William. Schools Without Failure. New York: Perennial Library, 1969.

This is a critical discussion of why schools are not succeeding. The author sees lack of interaction and involvement of students in active learning as a prime weakness.

Luria, A.R. Cognitive Development. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976.

This is a description of field research done by the author in the Soviet Union in the 1930's in a small agricultural area which was being collectivized. He studied the effects of literacy and collectivization on the thinking processes of the inhabitants.

Piaget, Jean. T-he Psychology of the Child. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1969.

This is Piaget's own introduction to this theory about the psychology of the child.

Piaget, Jean. The Language and Thought of the Child. New York: The World Publishing Company, 1971.

This is a presentation of Piaget's view of the relationship of thought to language. He sees language as an externalization of thought. This is a particularly hierarchical view of learning and child development.

Poatman, Neil, and Charles Weingartner. Linguistics: A Revolution in Teaching. New York: A Delta Book, 1966.

This is a presentation of why language is a vital form of learning. They present their use of it in the classroom and see developing these skills as a way for students to take active part in their learning.

Rogers, Carl R. Freedom to Learn. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969.

This book describes and advocates a learning experience in which the learner uses the emotions as well as the intellect. He

compares this to a more traditional learning which he sees as not involving feelings and therefore having no relevance for the whole person.

Vygotsky, Leon S. Thought and Language. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. press, 1962.

This is a presentation of a dialectical view of the development of thought and language. Vygotsky has learned much from Piaget but argues against his views on the relationship between thought and language.

II. The Structure, Environment and Curriculum of "Our Class"

Structure of the Class

Time

Our class meets three hours a day, five days a week. The class time is divided into three sections: skills work in a group, individual skills work, and group discussion time. Students are expected to participate in all activities, though they can choose the order of the first two. The whole class works together during the discussion period.

Students

We have approximately 35 students enrolled for 16 weeks. All students take a short reading test when they enter our school. If their reading scores are between the 4th and 6th grade average scores, they are encouraged but not forced to take "Our Class." We feel that students have to recognize their academic needs and then choose to do something about them. It should be their decision to take control of their education. Although all the students are poor readers, the class is made up of many different kinds of people with a wide range of interests and abilities. We consciously encourage interaction among the students so that they get to know each other and learn to work together while respecting these differences. This kind of group identity is an important aspect of the class structure.

Physical Layout

Our classroom is arranged to support the activities that take place within it. During the first two hours ? the room is divided into two sections. In the front of the room where we teach reading we have a group of chairs in a semicircle in front of the blackboard. The use of chairs rather than desks encourages students to actively participate rather than retreat into notetaking, doodling, or sleep. It permits easy movement to the front of the room, minimizing the physical separation that normally helps to define the teacher as presenter and central figure and students as passive receivers.

In the rest of the room — about 2/3 of the space — we have six-person tables and chairs. Students are not given assigned seats when they work there but are allowed to choose their seats and move around during class as long as they are quiet and don't disrupt other people.

During a short break between the first two hours and the last hour of the class, we rearrange the chairs into one large circle, All students must sit in the circle during the last hour.

Use of Teachers

Our Class has always been team taught. We have one English/ Reading teacher and one Social Studies/History teacher. The reading teacher leads the group reading and writing section of the class in the front of the room. During this time the social studies teacher works individually with the other students who are doing assignments at the tables. During the last hour both teachers participate in the discussions, although the social studies teacher is primarily responsible for group leadership. We have found that we also need extensive planning time since we want to learn each other's skills and support each other in class. We do formal lesson planning about twice a week and also spend considerable time discussing individual students and their progress.

Lessons and Folders

Students are given a checklist of weekly assignments when they come into the class Monday morning. The assignments listed are then distributed and worked on in class each day. All work must be completed and organized neatly by Friday unless a student has been ill or excused. All students have a folder in class in which they must keep their work. These folders cannot leave the class. If a folder is lost the student must make up all missing work that has not yet been checked. Each Friday the teachers collect the folders and review and respond to all work which has not already been corrected in class.

Supplies

Students are expected to bring their own supplies to school. If they forget their pens or pencils, and they often do, we have a "collateral" system which allows them to exchange a personal possession for a writing utensil during the class period. When the pencil is returned the teacher returns the possession. This establishes the teacher as a supportive person, gives students one less excuse to avoid work, and encourages the student to take responsibility.

Credit

Students receive credit in the class if they attend class regularly, participate in all the activities of the class and complete all assignments. The teachers evaluate the student's work and involvement on an individual basis. So, for example, a student who has real difficulty completing anything might be evaluated initially on the basis of finishing the work rather than on the content. Another student however, might be reviewed for grammar, spelling and content. We do not give letter grades; rather, we write a descriptive paragraph about each student's work at the end of each quarter (eight week period). All evaluations are written by the two teachers together. We have found that we have different feelings, opinions and reactions to students and their work. By talking together we gain greater insight and a broader perspective on a student's work and development.

We feel that these organizational structures of the class are an integral and important part of helping students to develop a positive attitude about school and their ability to learn there. In the first two hours students are given structured specific assignments but have the freedom of movement and timing. In the last hour they are told where to be but are given freedom to choose how to participate and what to discuss. We have tried to create a structure that reflects a concern for both individual growth and group interaction. We allow for student individuality in achieving these goals.

Classroom Environment

We believe that the social environment of the classroom greatly influences the kind of learning that takes place. In teaching the class we pay close attention to those aspects of the environment which we see as particularly important: group work, cooperation, risk-taking, choice and control, and the role of teachers.

Group Work

A large proportion of our work is done in groups. We have found that when students work together they learn from each other and develop a sense that they and other people are both interesting and important. This growth of self-confidence allows them to be more open to new learning experiences. In our discussions during the third hour of class we encourage discussion about daily life. The students are then given an arena in which to share experiences and compare them. The differences among people, their experiences and expectations then come into the open. Because we talk about them openly students learn that differences, either personal, racial, ethnic or cultural, are both interesting and acceptable rather than signs of either inferiority or superiority. This process also exposes students to many new words and to the power of words in conversation. So, for example, we have found that discussion about race in class allows for far greater freedom of communication between racially different students.

We also tend to make "behavior problems" a class issue which can be discussed openly since we assume that it is the interaction between the individual and the environment which has created the problem, either now in our class or in the past. We allow students to criticize our behavior, explain what we are doing and the reasons for it, and apologize when that is appropriate. Students see that it is not important to "win" or "control" a discussion but rather to participate in it in a responsible way.

The fact that these conversations take place within the classroom gives them a protection that we have found to be very important. Thus when anger or other strong feeling comes out in discussion, it stays within the group. It is handled verbally and is seldom carried further after class.

Cooperation

We want our students to want to be in class. Learning to interact with peers in a supportive non-competitive way is both difficult and very desirable for adolescents. We feel that cooperation comes through the experience of working with others around many different kinds of activities, both verbal and written. The structured group work on reading depends heavily on the active participation of students: pointing out words, sounding out words aloud and listening carefully to other people's pronunciation. We also allow students to work together on their writing assignments. Since students work at tables rather than individual desks, they fall easily into reading aloud together, discussing difficult questions, and comparing answers. We do not accept copying, but we do feel that students learn better and are less afraid of new projects if there are others working with them. Quiet talk and movement also give the classroom a gentler, less austere tone.

In the discussion time, everyone has the right to participate in the group as they choose. These sessions are often tense and difficult at the beginning of the year because students distrust their differences and fear the judgment of other students, but in time, as students realize that competition is not rewarded and that listening as well as talking is important, shy students begin to participate more actively and outgoing students begin to draw other people out as well as speak for themselves.

Risk Taking

We want students to take chances and try new projects in school. The students in this class are below grade level in reading and they tend to have low self-confidence. One of our primary goals is to build up this self-confidence and help students to view mistakes as a means to learning rather than a reflection of their own stupidity. For this reason we do not grade student performance and work according to an absolute standard.

We evaluate on the basis of change and development rather than correctness, and we tend to be descriptive rather than Judgmental. When students have different ideas we try to point this out instead of fostering agreement. In reading and working on the phonic code, we emphasize the fact that for many words in English there are many "correct" pronunciations depending on the part of the country where a person was raised. We do not allow people to laugh at or ridicule each other. We emphasize by our words and actions that success in the class is not defined by superiority over others but rather by one's willingness to try, make mistakes, and try again. Risk- taking then becomes part of the definition of success and is not dangerous.

Choice and Control

We give students a great deal of choice within well- defined boundaries and expectations. We articulate our expectations clearly and often. However, we do recognize that we can't determine how each student will best learn. We are finding that we often have to negotiate with students -about what work they will and can do. This process of negotiations has become an important part of the classroom environment. Students can choose when to work on reading and writing in a group and when they prefer to work alone during the first two hours of class. They are often given choices of what story to read or what to write about. Finally, they can choose how and when to participate in discussions.

Allowing this kind of flexibility is an outgrowth of our view that if a student has a variety of alternatives, all of which allow him or her to learn and succeed, then there is little motivation to choose failure as the one way of affirming personal independence and taking control. It encourages students to take responsibility for their learning in a positive way, and it helps students to see teachers as sympathetic, supportive adults and only minimally as authority figures.

The Role of Teachers

As teachers we view our function in the class as basically facilitators for the students, and we feel that team teaching is a crucial part of creating a classroom environment in which students view us as approachable and potentially helpful. As two individuals we are very different in personal style and interests. We share our differences with the students. We find them interesting and not threatening. We point out our strengths and weaknesses and often laugh and joke with one another about them (Karen is a poor speller and Alice tends to be shy in discussions). By our personal interaction with each other we establish ourselves as people with feelings, opinions, and personalities, and this, in turn, encourages students to do the same.

Our classroom is organized around the perspective that there is a close relationship between learning to accept oneself and learning to read and write well. We share this perspective with the students through our behavior, our choice of subject matter, and our organization of the class. We are very direct with the students and let them know what we expect in terms of work and behavior in class. We want our students to take responsibility for their participation in class, for we feel that this helps them to know themselves better and become more powerful learners.

Curriculum Content

Structured Group Work

In the direct teaching of reading, i.e., the structured group lessons which comprise one of the first two hours of the day, we specifically work with the large sight vocabulary which most of our students have. By using what they already know, students begin to enjoy the power of words and realize that they themselves have many of the necessary tools for building new decoding skills. We specifically train students in the skill of listening closely to themselves and others, breaking down and identifying the sound components of words, and relating these to written symbols.

The major teaching tools in doing this are the phonetic code and the game of transformations.

The phonetic code is a group of large charts divided into columns. It has in a separate column each sound of English and every spelling of that sound which occurs in English. The activities of the class during the first four to six weeks involve acquainting students with the code through a variety of games, a few of which are suggested here:

1. Choose a vowel sound (Example: a as in mate). Ask students to call out as many words as they can think of which have that sound. If a word is mentioned which does not have that sound, let the class pronounce, discuss and arrive at a decision about whether it should be in this group. List these words on the board, dividing them into groups according to the different spellings of the sound. Using the phonetic code, which gives all the different spellings, try to think of at least one word for every spelling of the sound (example: ache, break, ballet, aim, gauge, vein, way, prey, etc.).

When these words have been elicited, there are numerous activities that can be used as follow up: 1) The class as a group or individual students write a story or sentences using the words. The assignment can be made more challenging by putting a requirement of 1,2,3,4, or 5 words in each sentence. 2) The words are erased. Then the teacher calls out one of the words. Students take turns or volunteer to come up to the front and point out the word on the phonic code, first pointing only to sound columns, then pointing to the correct spelling of the sound as it appears in the word.

2. Choose a particular spelling (Example: ou). Have the class use the phonetic code to find all the different sounds which that spelling can have. They do this by examining all the sound columns to discover where the spelling appears. Then the class lists as many words as possible for each different sound of that spelling (example: cough, soup, enough, out, courage, would). The activities listed in the first exercise can also apply here. It is especially challenging for the class or individuals to try writing a sentence which contains all the sounds for one spelling.

3. When students are able to pronounce single syllable words pointed out on the p.c. by the teacher and when most students are able to easily and correctly point out short words themselves, the class can then begin to use the p.c. as a resource in decoding much longer multisyllable words. When introducing a new vocabulary list, which might be based on a story, a sound, or a syllable, the teacher first shows the students how to look at the word in syllables. If they cannot figure out the pronunciation this way, the teacher can then point out the word on the p.c.

In all of these exercises students are given the opportunity to use what they know, to figure things out for themselves, and to take an active role as learners.

The game of transformations is another powerful way to make students aware of the skills of reading. In this game students are asked to change one word into another word (example: in— >trip). Four kinds of sound/ spelling transformations are allowed in the game: 1) substitution- dropping one sound and substituting another in its place (in —>it). 2) addition- adding one sound at the beginning or end of a word (it—> pit). 3) reversalreversing all the sounds of a word regardless of spelling (pit—>tip). 4) insertion- inserting a new sound into the middle of the word keeping all the sounds already there (tip —>trip). Thus the transformations from in to trip might look like this: in —>it — >pit —>tip —>trip. Any of the four transformations may be used many times or not at all within the game.

Subtraction is not allowed, for this would make the game too easy. Only one sound/spelling transformation at

a time is allowed and each transformation must result in an English word. Slides are permitted. A slide is when you change the spelling but not the sound of a word or when you change the sound but not the spelling:

figure available in print format

A slide does not count as a transformation and so may be used in addition to any of the four transformations.

figure available in print format

These are examples of other word transformations:

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The possibilities are limitless in the game of transformations. There is almost always more than one "right" way to go from one word to another. The game can be simple or very difficult. It can be a game for individual students or for a group, with volunteers calling out ideas. In all the exercises using the phonic code and the game of transformations there is no line drawn between the study of reading, spelling and self-expression in writing. The possible games are limited only by the creativity of the teacher and her responsiveness to student needs and interests. Any of the games may be complex or simple. Students are allowed to use what they know, to be creative, and they are, at the same time, expected to play by the rules of the game. This freedom within discipline is basic to the approach and is a major reason why it works well in "Our Class."

In addition to the games suggested above, the structured group work in class includes reading aloud in small groups, extensive work on spelling, understanding and the use of vocabulary, some discussion of content and personal reactions to stories students have read individually, the reading aloud of student stories, and reading aloud to students.

Individual Assignments—Writing

When students work for an hour each day at the tables, the focus is on individual reading and writing. Sometimes the assignment is an outgrowth of work we have done together, and any assignment which requires new knowledge or skills must have been introduced and practiced in the group. In choosing writing assignments we make the assumption that students who have been unsuccessful or frightened away from writing in the past are more likely to break down those barriers if they feel familiar and secure with the subject matter. We ask them to write about specific experiences they have had and people they have known. The following is typical of the dialogue that often takes place:

Student: "What you want me to write about never happened to me."

Teacher: "Write a story then about another person who did that."

Student: "I don't know anyone like that."

Teacher: "Make it up. Make it ridiculous or silly. Don't worry about it being real. Just write. Use something you've seen on T.V. to get you started. Try to write at least five sentences. It is more important to write something than to write something well."

Student: "I can't think of any way to start."

Teacher: "I'll give you the first sentence."

In the case of the most constipated students a final tactic is often: "I can't think of anything to say. This is a boring assignment."

If it really seems that the problem is more fear than a power struggle with the teacher, we may suggest that the student write very briefly what he or she did yesterday or what he or she did between waking up and arriving at school. The idea here is to finally reduce the exercise of writing to a challenge that can be met, and for some students it seems to involve choosing a subject which is known and familiar but has no emotional overtones.

More often students are eventually delighted to discover that their lives and their issues can be integrated into their experiences in the classroom. Students who initially respond to our assignments by flatly refusing to write about themselves because it invades their privacy, may come up with wild fantasies or absurdly humorous tales about an imaginary person. They are pleased because they have tricked us; we are pleased because they have begun to think and write. More often after this kind of resistance we receive a story that begins in the third person but eventually switches to "I."

If a student is not afraid to write, we may insist that he or she follow the specific directions of the assignment to develop skills of organization, clarity, continuity, or detail — not usually all at once. Unless a student seems interested in having the paper corrected for "proper grammar" we tend to correct -first for spelling, then for simple punctuation. Words frequently misspelled on student papers may become the vocabulary to be pointed out on the phonic code.

To aid students in developing criteria for reasonable punctuation, we ask them to read aloud what they have written and to put in a period when they hear themselves pause. If a student has difficulty doing this for himself, he can work with another person. They can listen to and "punctuate" one another. We then look together at the words which have been grouped together to see if they make a clear, complete thought that makes sense. This can also be a group assignment on a paragraph that has been dittoed and distributed.

Both in choosing subject matter and in correcting papers we try to give students independent, enjoyable, and sensible ways to develop their writing.

New Experiences
Although the subject matter of much of "Our Class" is designed to make students realize that what they now know is both valuable and interesting, we also believe that exposing students to new experiences and new people is equally important in promoting growth. We try to take students out of the school and have guest speakers at least once a week.

Many of the trips we take are to institutions — the court system, a bank, an area college, etc. Because of their youth or their particular socio-economic status, the students we teach have had either minimal contacts with these institutions or very negative ones, usually as victims (as defendants in court, watching a parent's car being repossessed, etc.). Car trips are designed to show students how institutions work and how they, through understanding them, can have more control over their contacts with them and use them for their own purposes.

Some of our trips are just for fun (roller skating, going for pizza). They build group spirit and give students a chance to share strengths and interests which are seldom seen in a school setting.

Speakers we invite to class are people who have chosen a particular occupation or have made conscious

choices about their lives, and who are willing and able to share this with young people: a policeman, a former bank robber and prisoner, a reporter, a pimp, a union organizer, a steelworker, a Gay rights activist, and many others. We ask students to ask questions and state their own opinions, and we invite guests who are not afraid of dialogue end disagreement.

When we ask students to evaluate themselves and the class, we receive comments about all parts of the curriculum which we have detailed above. However, the part of the class which a]ways is mentioned—sometimes positively, sometimes negatively, but always with passion—is the group discussion which makes up the third hour of the class. During this hour when we sit together in a circle and talk. The opening question for the group may come from any part of the curriculum detailed above: a story, a student's paper, the point of view of a speaker. It may come from a newspaper article one of us has read, an event in the school or a neighborhood that everyone is talking about, or opinion that a student brings to the group. However, the part of this experience that provokes reaction is less the specific subject discussed than the experience of the group. We are asking students to sit together, to speak for themselves, to listen and respect other people and their feelings, and to realize that the ability to function within a group is a skill to be respected and learned. In this part of the class, speaking for communication and listening carefully is taught much more directly. It is the subject, as well as the methodology of the class. For most students the experience is both fascinating and very threatening. No subjects or feelings are taboo. It is, perhaps more than any other part of the class, the experience which asks students to believe that school and learning can be integrated with subjects and interests which consume the rest of one's life. For some students this is the key to a first real active involvement in school. For others it is a time to listen and to finally get a glimpse of the real people who sit across the room.

III. Our Method of Choosing and Using Reading Materials

When we ask students to read independently our goal is that they enjoy reading, that they begin to view it not as a painful task to be finished, but as an exploration which relates to and extends personal experience. To make this possible we select stories carefully and screen them for difficulty and subject matter.

Difficulty

In assessing the difficulty of a story we consider length, vocabulary, and sentence structure. We choose short stories because high school students who have not made friends with books usually approach the experience of reading with fear, distrust, and lack of interest. They often check the length and refuse to begin a story if it is more than five to ten pages long, particularly at the beginning of the year when many of their attitudes are shaped by past failure.

Even more important is the vocabulary and sentence structure. Stories should contain words likely to be in students' sight and spoken vocabulary and should have fairly simple, straightforward sentence structure. If a story is filled with words and syntax which are highly unfamiliar it may be seen as a challenge for several paragraphs, but it soon becomes merely tedious. Reading for enjoyment should not be similar to translating a foreign language.

Subject Matter

Because we believe that reading skills are developed as a result of interest in what is written as well as the

awareness of ability to succeed, we also give close attention to the subject matter of stories. The content of the stories we choose relates in fairly direct ways to the conscious concerns, experiences, and emotional development of our students. They are adolescents going through the transition from childhood to adulthood, and this involves changing and redefining one's self-concept and social relationships. The themes which emerge are dependence versus independence, failure and success, and the criteria and boundaries for accepting and rejecting oneself and other people. In addition, because most of our students are poor, the issue of survival—what kind and at what cost—is an overriding one.

At the beginning o£ the year we use almost exclusively the series of readers called Directions 1, 2, 3, and 4. Most of the stories in this series are about young people — older teenagers who have lives similar to those of the students in the class. The characters are mainly from poor or working-class backgrounds and a variety of ethnic groups. Unlike many books and stories written specifically for adolescents, they do not promote the view that if you try hard you always succeed in life. Rather, they focus on survival, personal decision-making, and emotional growth. Life is seen as process.

An excellent example of the stories in this series is "The Kite and the Pillow," a successful black man's remembrances of his parents -the mother (the pillow) who raised him and his brothers in great hardship and who finally withered and collapsed, and the father (the kite) who visited the home only in his brief moments of success in order to give his sons an attractive role model. The narrator, upon reflection, feels that he owes his success to his father! We or our students may disagree with his conclusion, but the situation is familiar and the issues real.

Another story tells of a teenage boy who comes to live in a foster home on an Iowa farm. The scene is a hunting expedition on a fall day. The farmer desperately wishes for a hunting companion like his son, who has died. The boy, who has seen his father shot dead, resolves to leave rather than fire a rifle. The issues are communication, pride, and human need.

Each Directions book is divided loosely into sections around themes such as emotions' growing, families, heroes, etc. In the two more advanced ones, Directions 3 and 4 there are sections on issues such as Folk Tales from Other Cultures. We have used selections from all of these, but find that the most successful are those which reflect our general approach to working with the students, stories which make literature of the real concerns and issues of their lives.

New Stories

The titles listed at the end of this section represent our attempt to go beyond the Directions series to find, within a larger body of American Literature, stories which fulfill the criteria already discussed, i.e., brevity, relative simplicity of vocabulary and syntax, and high interest.

The stories will probably not be discussed in great detail or analyzed in a literary way in the class. However, they do have some common themes which are worth mentioning. With the exception of Erskine Caldwell's "Daughter," all the stories have as central characters young people who are in the process of defining themselves in relationship to family, peers, the adult world, class, or race.

Family relationships are particularly important in "Day of the Bullet," "Half a Gift," "We are Looking at You, Agnes," "Indian Camp," "Jacksonville and After," and "Daughter." Other adult/child relationships are explored in "Thank You, Ma'am" and "The Inside Search."

Peer relationships, and with them the awareness of class and race relationships, are central to "The Fare to Crown Point," "Daughter," and "Alien Turf."

There is also one other obvious way in which these stories may be grouped. "Alien Turf," "Half a Gift," and the first three excerpts from Zora Neale Hurston's Dust Tracks on a Road are autobiographical. Narrated in the first person, they involve the writer as main character and clearly affirm personal experience as a valid subject matter. Since this reflects the focus of most of our writing assignments in the class and since we often ask students to organize and assemble some of their writing into an autobiography during the last weeks of the class, we will probably use these autobiographical stories first. Some students may see them as a model or inspiration. Other students will choose not to make that connection.

One story, "We Are Looking at You, Agnes," is unique in that it is written as a stream of consciousness. The use of this technique usually makes a story very difficult for poor readers because comprehension cannot be based on following a sequence of actions. However, this particular story is extremely simple in terms of syntax and vocabulary; it is highly repetitive and emotionally charged. We think it will offer an excellent introduction to a technique of writing which our students may begin to understand and even choose to use in their own writing if they are adventuresome.

Activities: Vocabulary Study

Although we try to choose stories that are potentially high- interest and easy to read, the stories frequently have some difficult words. The challenge may be that 1) most students do not know the meaning of a word even though they can decode it (read it with correct pronunciation) or that 2) students cannot decode the word without help, and when they do it may or may not be in their spoken vocabulary. Words which fall into either of these categories, especially if they are essential to understanding the story, are chosen to form a vocabulary list. We add to them some words which most students cannot spell, although they can read and understand them. There are always many of these, but we choose those most important to understanding the story.

For the purpose of illustration, the following words, which could form the vocabulary/spelling list for "We Are Looking at You, Agnes," can be divided into the three categories listed above:

Meaning	Meaning and/or-Pronunciation	Spelling
parlor	stenographer	amount
scald	manicurist	business
frock	canal	salary
	alcohol	comfortable
	Birmingham	collar
	Nashville	
	New Orleans	

There is some overlap, but the majority of the words are challenging in a limited number of ways. Only stenographer and manicurist are likely to be new to most students in the three areas of spelling, meaning, and reading decoding. Some of the vocabulary lists are much more heavily weighted with words which are new in meaning and pronunciation, but as a general rule we find that 15-20 words is the maximum which can be successfully introduced at one time and that the experience is much more productive if the list is reasonably well-balanced. If, in choosing the words for a five- or six-page story, we discover that there are many more than 25 words, we begin to suspect that the story will be difficult and require extensive preparation or that it

should be discarded or saved for later.

In introducing the vocabulary words, we generally list them one at a time on the board in the order in which they appear in the story. We then take time to decode the pronunciation, using comparisons with other words which students may know. We discuss the meaning of each word, point out difficulties in its spelling, and make sentences orally. Written activities using the vocabulary always follow; several are suggested in the lesson plans at the end of the section.

Once the vocabulary of a story is familiar we then assign the story and hand out a questionnaire. The questions, usually no more than 10, cover factual content (what, who, when, where?), simple inference (why?), sequence, and finally personal reactions of the reader (What do you think happens next? What, who did you like, dislike and why? If you were in a similar situation what would you have done?).

If the story or vocabulary has been difficult for a significant number of students, we may correct any of these papers together, but more often we look at students' work as it is being done to make sure that they know what they are doing; then we examine the papers more closely outside of class.

The lesson plans which come after the list of titles deal with two of the stories and provide more specific examples of the exercises discussed above. They are presented as a series of sheets which might be handed out in ditto form since the group activities have already been outlined in some detail.

New Stories with Annotations

1. "Daughter," by Erskine Caldwell. A white sharecropper, who has killed his eight-year old daughter, is freed from jail by his neighbors after they decide that he is not the criminal in the murder.
2. "We Are Looking at You, Agnes," by Erskine Caldwell. This is the painful, unspoken monologue of a girl sitting in the parlor of her parents' home; she silently begs her family to ask her questions which will allow her to admit the scandal of her life in the city.
3. "The Day of the Bullet," by Stanley Ellin. In one fateful experience involving the mob, the police, and his father, a boy discovers that the world is run by those who are strong rather than those who are just.
4. "Indian Camp," by Ernest Hemingway. A boy goes with his father, a doctor, to deliver an Indian woman's baby. He learns about how people react to pain both from his father, an outsider, and from the woman's husband.
5. "Thank You, Ma'am," by Langston Hughes. A young teenage boy receives care and compassion from a woman whose purse he has tried to snatch on the street.
Dust Tracks on a Road by Zora Neale Hurston.
6. Chapter III, "I Get Born" pp. 27- 32.
7. Chapter IV, "The Inside Search" pp. 39- 45.
8. Chapter V, "Figure and Fancy" pp. 71-78, line 5.
The book is an autobiography. The first of these excerpts recounts the author's birth, the second her relationship with a white man who helped deliver her, and the third her adventures in the world of her imagination.
9. Chapter VIII, "Jacksonville and After," pp. 97- 100.
This excerpt tells of the relationship between the author's father and her oldest sister and how a

beating changed that relationship and both their lives.

10. "The Fare to Crown Point," by Walter Myers. A young black junkie finds himself momentarily fascinated and softened by the plight of a lonely white girl and her illegitimate baby.

11. "Alien Turf," by Piri Thomas. A Puerto Rican boy moves into an Italian neighborhood, finally decides to stand up for himself, and learns how street kids define fair play.

12. "Half a Gift," by Robert Zacks. A boy learns about thoughtfulness and loyalty through the experience of choosing and giving a Mother's Day gift with his brother.

Vocabulary Sheet II

Instructions: Using the words and meanings listed on Vocabulary Sheet I, fill in the blanks in this story. Each word can be used only once.

Mary was tired as she closed the front door and walked slowly down the front hall past the _____ door. It was the end of a hot summer day and her cool,_____ summer was now wrinkled and clinging. Even the starched _____ which had stood up so nicely around her neck this morning was now limp.

She remembered days like this when she was a child in_____, Louisiana. She and her brother Tom would put on their bathing costumes and dive into the _____ which ran in back of the house. Life had seemed so simple then and full of promise.

It was different now. Tom was a rich _____ man in_____ Tennessee. He probably went out to lunch in air-conditioned restaurants with pretty young _____ from his office. And here was Mary, stuck _____, Alabama, wasting her life taking care of old Aunt Lucy. Her job as a_____ in the downtown beauty shop seemed dull and hopeless. After all, rich ladies' finger nails were no more interesting than her own, and she earned only a small _____ of money each week.

She was called away from her thoughts by Aunt Lucy's complaining voice coming from the back of the house: "Mary, Mary, is that you? Come into the kitchen now! I've been waiting for you. Wipe off the kitchen table with a rag soaked in _____ to kill those germs. Then boil some water to _____ the dishes before you dry them and set the table for supper!"

Mary sighed. Aunt Lucy was getting crazy in her old age. Nothing was clean enough to satisfy her and she was becoming more and more demanding. Mary felt trapped. Was this all she could expect of life? She laid down her purse on the chair in the hall and walked slowly toward the kitchen.

Questions on "We Are Looking at You, Agnes"

1. Who is thinking aloud in this story?
2. What did Agnes do with the money her father gave her to go to business school?
3. How did Agnes get in trouble in her job as a manicurist in a barbershop?
4. Where has Agnes lived since she left home?
5. Why does Agnes come home once a year?
6. Why is she so unhappy on her visits home?
7. Why do her parents scald her dishes and wipe her chair with alcohol?
8. If you were Agnes what would you do to make things better?
9. If you were her parents what would you do?
10. Why do you think no one in the family can talk about what is going on?

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