

OVERCOMING PRIMARY READING DIFFICULTIES.

T. M. DEAM, ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT,
JOLIET TOWNSHIP HIGH SCHOOL.

What are the mental processes of a child in learning to read? This is the question which the writer of this paper, who has been a high school teacher, undertook to answer two years ago when the first of his own two children at the end of her first school year encountered some reading difficulties. As a parent, where could he find the information that would throw light upon an unexpected problem in his own home with his own child?

While some anxiety existed in the mind of the parent, nevertheless he felt his child's difficulties were corrective and with this hope in mind he set himself to two tasks: first, to read what psychology has taught regarding the difficulties of a child in learning to read; and second, to try his art of teaching with his own child. As a vacation job, at neither loss of time to himself or child, what could be more interesting, and perhaps more profitable, than such a course of study?

As a parent, he could not be expected to set up the apparatus or take the time necessary to carry on an experiment such as the analysis of the steps given by Starch¹, for instance, entails. He could at best but make observation of his child while reading under his own careful attention and supervision, and then, if necessary, turn his child over to a clinic.

The parent was made somewhat happy when he learned from his readings that the wiggings of the body—movements of the hands, the feet, and the trunk were neither hindrances or assists but were the efforts of the child to adjust herself to this more or less artificial form of behavior involved in reading.

It was some satisfaction again, to learn, that reading is a *complex* process, involving at least three major difficulties, according to Buswell²: (1) acquiring ability to pronounce words, (2) recognition of meaning of words, and (3) interpreting sentences or paragraphs. It was probably one or all of these pitfalls that had been causing the trouble.

In observing the child it was found that she did not seem to

¹ Starch, Daniel, *Educational Psychology* the Macmillan Co., 1922, p. 261.

² Buswell, Guy Thomas, *Fundamental Reading Habits: A Study of their Development*. Supplementary Educational Monographs, The University of Chicago, 1922, No. 21 p. 4

relate the printed word with the spoken word. With her eyes on one page she was pronouncing by rote what was printed on the opposite page or in other parts of the book. Her associations in the home had developed in her ability to pronounce and use some words quite beyond her years. Illness of the mother, occupation of the attention of the father in the supervision of pupils on the high school level, together, had worked at a disadvantage to the advancement of one in their own family. They had not put themselves on the level of the child in their leisure and play life. For that matter, that particular year, they had had very little leisure or play.

Securing from the first grade teacher, five books—three primary readers and two first readers, the child was set to a task against which she at first rebelled. The easiest of the three primary readers was given to her first and she was required to read fifteen pages a day, with the reward of one dollar if she completed the book by the end of the first week. Her storm of protest, at what she felt was a ponderous task, was overcome by a threat of punishment. Having her attention drawn to the picture and glancing at the work below she caught an association that began to work wonders. She began to feel that she could read. Within five minutes she had read the fifteen pages. Before a week she had read the book, and received her dollar. She needed no punishment. She was given another primary reader, with the same reward offered her. Within a week she had completed the second book. She was then given a first reader, but required to read but five pages a day. In order to restore confidence, after completing the first reader, she was again given a primary reader. A second of the first readers was given her as the last of the group. She was then ready for her vacation. She had her five dollars and the joy that she could read as other little girls.

The author of this paper does not offer this method as a solution to all cases. He is conscious that he violated more than one psychological principle in teaching. He only knows that his method worked. At the end of her third school year, which happens to coincide with the time of writing this paper, the parent is glad to report that his daughter is reading on the average of more than one book a week and is among the very best in the third year class. She has made the reading adaptation, reading story books, children's magazine's, funnies with great enjoyment. She is healthy and in every way normal.

Lack of attention in the home, and perhaps, somewhat the temperament of the child, may be given as the causes of the reading difficulties. The child had built up a defense attitude, although but seven years old which might have developed into a real problem case. As a teacher of more advanced pupils, the author wonders if many problem cases do not have their origin in conditions not unlike that in his own home.