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ABSTRACT

The staff of the Individualized Language Arts Diagnosis, Prescription, and Evaluation Project, a funded ESEA Title III program, has developed methods based on a diagnostic-teaching framework designed to analyze students' writing skills for grades 1-12. The program structure also provides teachers with methodology for developing and reinforcing other language skills. The project is stated to be oriented toward discovery and its techniques suitable for many groups, graded or non-graded classes, and various classroom organizations. Rationale, guidelines, activities, procedures, strategies, specific examples, and results are provided. The curricular techniques employed by the program are considered transferable to other schools, with particular relevance for those districts consisting of large numbers of disadvantaged children whose language needs are believed to be especially critical. Contact persons furnishing additional information about the project are cited. (AM)

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INDIVIDUALIZED LANGUAGE

_____ diagnosis

_____ pre

_____ evaluation

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Weehawken Board of Education

Weehawken, N. J. 07087

DR. RICHARD E. ONOREVOLE, Superintendent of Schools

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The development and dissemination of individualized Language Arts are a cooperative effort of the Office of Program Development, Division of Research, Planning, and Evaluation/Field Services, New Jersey Department of Education and the Weehawken Public Schools.

Individualized Language Arts has been validated by the standards and guidelines of the United States Office of Education as innovative, successful, cost-effective, and exportable. The program has been endorsed for national dissemination by the Dissemination Review Panel, U.S. Office of Education. As a result, the project is funded as a demonstration site to offer dissemination materials and services to educators.

The State Department of Education bring to the attention of educators Projects which have become operational state with the aid of ESEA Title I. These Projects have been evaluated as substantially meeting the objectives and solutions to educational problems. The material on such a Project is of relevance for many school districts.

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Dr. Fred G.
Commissioner

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To the pupils and teachers of Weehawken

What is our Rationale?

Linguistics, or the study of language, provides knowledge which can be translated into techniques for improving selected aspects of writing instruction. These techniques can be blended with a language-experience approach, so that the language, feelings, and ideas of pupils can be used to promote motivation, precision, and control. Furthermore, such instruction utilizes writing activities in all parts of the curriculum, and can be organized within a diagnostic-teaching framework. Teachers and pupils can thus have continuous diagnosis of the writing, prescription of relevant methodology, and evaluation of results.

In general, this rationale provides for helping to meet pupils' important personal writing needs. Simultaneously, it offers a structure so that teachers may have guidelines, procedures, strategies, and many specific examples of how to teach writing. Other language skills--such as speaking, listening, and reading--are also developed and reinforced. Our approach is basically one of discovery. It can be used with either graded or non-graded classes. It can be employed with almost any kind of classroom organization.

Our rationale includes the expectation that pupils' language can be a powerful springboard for learning Language Arts skills. However, these skills are acquired in such a way that positive attitudes and understandings are promoted. These, in turn, generate and reinforce further skill development. Thus, a curriculum balance is struck between the ideas, feelings, and attitudes of the pupils and the acquisition of the writing skills necessary for success in life. Our program is intended to encourage growth: increasing self-confidence and positive achievement on the part of the children who are being helped to become better writers.

What is our Overview?

Authorities in the Language Arts agree that educators need to develop more effective methods of analyzing students' writing, and to prescribe and apply individualized instructional techniques in order to promote greater writing facility. Our Project, Individualized Language Arts Diagnosis, Prescription, and Evaluation, was designed to meet this critical need.

The pupils' writing development is traced by three samples, taken at three intervals during the year. The evaluation of the samples is based on criteria suggested by relevant Language Arts experimentation and by the Weehawken teachers. The evaluation pinpoints each pupil's current strengths and needs.

A prescriptive program which emphasizes the integration of subject areas is used in our Project. The program utilizes an individualized approach. Writing instruction is related to speaking, listening, and reading activities, as well as to the pupils' ideas and feelings.

The program is used in grades 1 - 12. The target population is highly mobile and includes many Spanish-speaking youngsters. The methods and materials in this program were developed cooperatively by the Project staff, Weehawken administrators and faculty members, and the pupils themselves.

What kinds of results have we seen?

In 1970-71, a statistical evaluation revealed that the writing skills of the children in our Project had definitely improved in certain ways.

We matched the youngsters in our third and sixth grades with children in the same grades in a nearby community which is very similar to Weehawken but whose schools use traditional methods of teaching Composition. We had both groups of children write and rewrite compositions on topics of their own choosing, but with no special help from teachers, at the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. Then we examined random samples of these compositions, looking for growth in terms of eleven criteria.

Five of the criteria were adapted from the work of Dr. Kellogg Hunt of Florida State University, a nationally-renowned expert in Language Arts research who has shown how the syntax in children's writing changes with maturation. The remaining criteria came from the Weehawken teachers themselves, who were using the compositions for their own diagnoses of the children's individual strengths and needs in writing. These criteria represented what the teachers considered to be the major needs of the Weehawken children as a whole, at the opening of the year.

At the start of the evaluation, we made a total of 44 predictions about the outcome. They proved to be between 85 and 90 percent correct.

The statistics showed that the Weehawken children were now writing longer, richer, and more varied sentences. A simple or complex sentence, or an independent clause inside a compound sentence, is what Dr. Hunt calls a "T-unit." He has discovered that average number of words per T-unit is the most significant score in correlating children's writing ability with grade level. On this vital score our sixth-graders registered a gain of over 45 percent in a single year, which put them well ahead of both the control-group children and the youngsters whom Hunt himself had studied. The Weehawken children were also writing longer dependent clauses. They were using more series of words and of word-groups, to convey greater amounts of information. They were moving parts of their sentences around to a larger extent, to vary their writing style and give better emphasis to the most important words and phrases.

Above all, our children tended to write a higher proportion of complex and compound sentences, and fewer simple sentences, as the year went by. The ability to combine simple sentences into complex and compound sentences is one of the surest signs of growth in writing. This ability showed itself even at the third-grade level; and it was accompanied by a better grasp of punctuation and of correct spelling, in most cases.

Actually, the statistics disclosed that the Weehawken children had progressed in three ways: They had gained longitudinally, with respect to most of the criteria, during the year. They had also shown considerably greater improvement than the control-group children taught by the traditional methods. And finally, they had scored far better on the relevant criteria than the youngsters in Hunt's research population. (This last point is especially impressive, since the young writers whom Hunt studied were native-born middle-class children in a Laboratory School at Florida State University, while the Weehawken children included a sizable number with Hispanic backgrounds.)

A follow-up statistical evaluation in 1971-72 indicated that these same Weehawken children generally continued to show improvement in their writing.

The compositions themselves, both in 1970-71 and again the next year, also showed growth in important aspects of writing which cannot be measured. The children's vocabulary, for instance, was rich and varied, and impressive for its maturity even in the lower elementary grades. It was also well organized; the stories revealed a clear sense of purpose and sequence.

After these two successive years of evaluation, we can now say with assurance that it is feasible, at minimal cost, to train classroom teachers to diagnose children's writing needs and prescribe techniques which can be used every day to meet those needs--with results much better than are being obtained in school systems which still rely on traditional methods of Language Arts instruction.

We can also assert by now that our techniques are definitely transferable to other schools--even inner-city schools where children's language needs are especially critical. For example, after our techniques were adopted by a Newark school with large numbers of Black and Hispanic children, a dramatic improvement was noticeable very soon in the youngsters' writing skills. For three years in a row, these children came out better on evaluations than control-group classes in the same school. But our techniques have worked successfully in suburban and rural schools, also, according to teachers who have tried them out in such schools.

What basic guidelines have we followed in the teaching of writing?

The teaching of writing should

be specifically related to the pupils' needs, purposes, interests, ideas, and feelings as much as possible;

be preceded by oral work;

utilize the pupils' own language, their own vocabularies, their own sentences and other structures;

be developed through a process of discovery, coupled with reinforcement, in a variety of situations meaningful to the pupils themselves;

be applied as an integral part of the regular classroom work in each content area in the elementary school, and as an integral part of all English teaching in the high school;

be concerned both with "turning on" the pupils -- motivating them, encouraging them to be imaginative -- and with helping them to develop stylistic competence;

be accompanied by constant on-going evaluation by the teacher - diagnosing the children's needs, and prescribing specific techniques to meet their needs.

What are some of the pupils' important personal needs that we have helped them meet through writing?

An individual may need to write to express his own feelings or attitudes:

- To express joy or happiness or gratitude
- To voice his wonder or curiosity or compassion
- To provide an outlet for anger or hostility
- To verbalize anxieties or worries

An individual may need to write to communicate with other human beings:

- To express friendship or personal interest
- To express an opinion or to editorialize
- To advance an idea or a theory or an explanation
- To describe an event or an incident
- To give or request information
- To apply for a job and to fulfill job requirements

Since we live in a literate society, it is essential that all pupils be helped to write to a degree of competence commensurate with their abilities.

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In a literate society, it is essential that all pupils be helped to write with a
competence commensurate with their abilities.

What are some activities that our teachers have been using to motivate pupils to want to write?

For pupils to want to write, the activities must be purposeful and satisfying. "Canned" busy-work topics, or extrinsic motivation, will not succeed for long.

A few of the large variety of activities which our teachers have employed to stimulate pupils to want to write are:

Field trips (even if just around the school or neighborhood)

Discussions of common experiences and feelings and/or current relevant topics and issues

Personal reactions to films or TV broadcasts, literature, drama, assembly programs, music, art, architecture, sculpture

Scripts for plays, student-made movies, special programs

Class logs, diaries, literary annuals

School or class newspapers

Letters to servicemen, absent classmates, parents, friends

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What procedure do our teachers follow in making each diagnosis?

First, each child submits a writing sample with which he is satisfied.

Then the teacher reads through the class set of papers, without a marking get a general overview of the writing competence of her pupils.

Using a Diagnostic Grid Sheet, the teacher reads each paper a second time on the Diagnostic Grid Sheet the specific needs of each child.

Having done this, she sets priorities on the basis of the greatest needs of taking into consideration the age, maturity, and interests of her pupils.

What is a Diagnostic Grid Sheet, and how is it devised?

The Diagnostic Grid Sheet is simply a convenient and efficient means for making the teacher's diagnosis. It is devised on the basis of objectives and needs identified actively by teachers and pupils, and can be used flexibly to best suit a teacher's instructional purposes.

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What is a Diagnostic Grid Sheet, and how is it used?

The Diagnostic Grid Sheet is simply a convenient and efficient means for recording the teacher's diagnosis. It is devised on the basis of objectives and needs identified cooperatively by teachers and pupils, and can be used flexibly to best suit a teacher's instructional

What procedures do our teachers follow in planning their prescriptive activities?

Keeping in mind the major writing needs that she has identified, the teacher selects techniques which will help the children to meet these needs. Usually, she can select a number of different techniques to cope with any one need, and so she also keeps the needs of her class in mind in picking the techniques she wants to use.

She deals with the highest-priority needs first. When future compositions are planned, the children have learned how to meet their most obvious needs, she begins to attack needs of lesser seriousness, and chooses new techniques accordingly.

How can the teacher and pupils be sure they are applying the techniques?

As she teaches each technique to the class, starting with well-motivated children and then helping the children to carry out the technique on their individual compositions, the teacher works cooperatively with the children in making up a Writing Checklist. This is a list of simply worded questions or directions which the children use to remind themselves to use the techniques during every writing activity. The checklist is cumulative. It is added up gradually as the teacher and pupils move from the original high-priority needs to needs of less seriousness. When the teacher works with individual pupils to improve their compositions or pupils work with each other, they refer to specific items on the Checklist for evaluation and recommendations.

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She deals with the highest-priority needs first. When future compositions show that children have learned how to meet their most obvious needs, she begins to attack problems of seriousness, and chooses new techniques accordingly.

Can the teacher and pupils be sure they are applying the techniques?

As she teaches each technique to the class, starting with well-motivated group compositions and then helping the children to carry out the technique on their individual compositions, the teacher works cooperatively with the children in making up a Writing Checklist. This is a list of simply worded questions or directions which the children use to remind themselves of the techniques during every writing activity. The checklist is cumulative. It is built gradually as the teacher and pupils move from the original high-priority needs to those of seriousness. When the teacher works with individual pupils to improve their compositions, the pupils work with each other, they refer to specific items on the Checklist for evaluation and commendations.

Is there a suggested general sequence of techniques for teaching pupils how to improve their writing?

Our teachers have experimented with the following developmental pattern and found it successful.

1. Begin with an experience or topic of interest.
2. Plan the composition with a short, informal outline.
3. Write a first draft.
4. Improve the draft in any or all of these ways:

Slotting for descriptive words
noun clusters
verbal phrases
appositives
prepositional phrases

Expanding sentences with short modifiers
duplication (series of words and word-groups)
clauses

Reconstructing sentences with movability
inversion
passive voice
embedding

Varying types of sentences: interrogative
exclamatory
imperative

5. (Optional) Extend the original composition by expansion by paragraph or by further outlining.

New words that have come up in slotting or expanding can be reinforced (along with important spelling or reading words) on future compositions through sentence synthesis.

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or reading words) on future compositions through sentence syntheses.

What provisions have we made for on-going diagnosis, prescription, and evaluation of pupils' progress?

A cumulative folder is kept for each child and, at the end of the year, is passed to the next teacher. Each year, three dated writing samples are added to the folder, and are kept for a period of three years so that the teacher can analyze the growth made by each pupil. Each June, pupils are encouraged to rewrite an earlier composition (written the previous September), incorporating the new skills they have acquired. The pupils also have free access to their folders so that they may be continuously aware of their growth and improvement.

The diagnostic procedure is repeated three times throughout the year. The (mid-year) diagnosis shows the teacher how much progress the children have made, so that she can re-order her priorities for the rest of the year. The year-end diagnosis gives the teacher a record of the progress made throughout the year, and of any continuing needs that should be brought to the attention of the children's next teacher the following year.

How much time should be devoted to writing each day?

No precise time limits can be set in the elementary school. As a general rule, there should be some original writing every day in the content areas of the curriculum. Instructional lessons, designed to meet specific needs as identified by the teacher, will vary according to grade level and the maturity of the pupils. The actual time is not as important as the fact that the teacher has diagnosed, set priorities, designed a plan, and evaluated periodically.

Similar principles apply on the secondary level. Writing assignments should be flexible in length, topic, and frequency, and should relate students' interests to the content of the English curriculum. Periodic diagnosis, planning, and evaluation of results are important for the high school teacher as for the elementary teacher.

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The diagnostic procedure is repeated three times throughout the year. The second diagnosis shows the teacher how much progress the children have made, so that she can order her priorities for the rest of the year. The year-end diagnosis gives the teacher a summary of the progress made throughout the year, and of any continuing needs that should be given the attention of the children's next teacher the following year.

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Similar principles apply on the secondary level. Writing assignments should be planned in length, topic, and frequency, and should relate students' interests to the content of the English curriculum. Periodic diagnosis, planning, and evaluation of results are just as important for the high school teacher as for the elementary teacher.

How were our own teachers trained and provided with continuing help?

Summer and school-term workshops were held to acquaint new teachers with the manual and to give experienced teachers the opportunity to share ideas and discuss procedures and techniques. In addition, consultant help was available from two college professors, the Elementary Supervisor, the head of the high school English department, and principals.

Each teacher was provided with a Manual of techniques which contained explanations of procedures, and many actual examples gathered from classroom teachers. This Manual is being revised on the basis of teachers' evaluations and suggestions. It is expected that the Manual will be available for general distribution at low per-copy cost by the end of this school year.



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Each teacher was provided with a Manual of techniques which contained explanations and examples, and many actual examples gathered from classroom teachers. This Manual is now being revised on the basis of teachers' evaluations and suggestions. It is expected that the new edition will be available for general distribution at low per-copy cost by the end of this school year.



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What are the requisites, and cost, for introducing this program into other school systems?

First, there must be an awareness of the values of teaching writing, and an assessment of the current curriculum. After needs have been identified, teachers and administrators must work cooperatively to find ways to meet specific needs.

Training and follow-up supervision of teachers is essential. Provision needs to be made for continuing help, encouragement, and support. However, the cost of incorporating the program into any existing curriculum is minimal. It depends almost entirely upon whatever consultants' fees, supervisor (or supervisors') salary, and stipends for teachers' attendance at workshops are agreed upon by the individual school system. Costs for materials (file folders, duplicating paper, and the previously-mentioned Teachers Manual) can probably be absorbed in present budgets.

What about textbooks and workbooks?

Even though a school system has an adopted textbook or other materials for teaching of English-Language Arts, it can easily incorporate our system of writing instruction into its existing curriculum. However, the classroom teacher who knows her pupils and their needs can design a meaningful, on-going program far superior to any textbook or workbook exercises that were mass-produced for a large general population. Furthermore, the inductive approach means that the pupils themselves should have a part in devising their own curriculum, according to their own felt needs.

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For further information about our Project, you are cordially invited to contact the Project Team.

Jeanette Alder, Principal and Project Director

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