SOME FACTORS INFLUENCING READING READINESS

By

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A Paper
Submitted to the Graduate Council of Florida State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Approved:

[Signatures]

June, 1952
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INTRODUCTION

Since reading is a skill of utmost importance for successful academic progress, its teaching becomes a topic of major concern to all educators. The promotion policies of many schools are based on reading achievement as measured by the teacher's informal appraisals and tests.¹ There is a necessity of investigating the conditions present at the beginning stages of reading for there is a higher percentage of pupil failure in the first grade than in any other grade.

Reading is both the most important and the most troublesome subject in the elementary school curriculum. It is most important since it is a tool the master of which is essential to the learning of nearly every other school subject. It is most troublesome since pupils fail in reading far more frequently than in any other elementary skill.²

A large number of investigations have revealed that there are many handicaps which are found more frequently in poor readers than in good readers.³ None of these handicaps will of itself necessarily prevent a child from becoming a normal reader, but any of them may, in an individual case, interfere seriously with the child's progress. Several

dissabilities are usually found in each pupil that has a pronounced difficulty in reading. The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the physical, mental, emotional and social phases of development that affect the beginning reader.

The writer has been teaching the fifth grade, but would like to teach in the primary grades. She would like to get a better understanding of the factors influencing the beginning reader so that she can be a more sympathetic and effective teacher.

Readiness is "a state of being in a condition to act." The child experiences readiness for every phase of his growth. He stands before he walks and he jabbers before he speaks, and he must attain a certain degree of maturity before he is ready to walk or speak. The same is true with reading, for no child is born ready to read. He must experience many developmental stages of growth to prepare him for this new process.

Reading readiness is the time at which the child can physically, mentally, emotionally and socially profit from systematic reading instruction. The chronological age of six years does not automatically qualify a child for reading experiences. Since children differ in their rates of development, some children at six years are not as mature

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as kindergarten children, while others are as advanced as eight year olds. This means that some children will be ready to read when they enter school, another group will reach this stage some time during the school year, and the less mature ones may not be ready for a year.

School authorities and parents often expect all children to read when they enter the first grade. Hence, children who have not attained the necessary readiness experience the most difficulty and frustration in adjusting to such a situation.

Some investigations have revealed that children are not ready to start reading until they have a mental age of six and a half years.¹ Reading then, should be delayed until the second semester of the beginning year or such a time as they attain the necessary readiness. One semester of growth at the six year old level is of tremendous significance because there should also be a simultaneous increase in physical and mental maturity. The child possessing a normal rate of development will progress successfully through the initial reading levels. Success can be more economically achieved by placing emphasis on reading readiness activities in terms of the individual's interests and abilities until a general readiness has been achieved.²

¹ Bond and Bond, op. cit., p. 25.
² Betts, op. cit., p. 256.
Immature or slow developing children may not be ready to start reading during the school year. These children are bewildered by the complexities of reading. If they are forced to compete with the faster developing children they soon become aware of their lack of success. This brings on a feeling of frustration, failure, and dislike for reading which often seriously interferes with their future efforts.

"Reading readiness activities are planned to develop interests and facility in use of the English language and to provide and extend needed experiences."¹

Some of the reading readiness activities are examining and handling of picture books, learning to care for books, turning the pages from front to back, and looking at the pictures from left to right. To enlarge their experiences, first grade classes frequently take walks and trips to visit people and places in the community. They learn to express themselves orally when they discuss their trip afterwards in the classroom. A sequence of ideas is developed by encouraging the children to talk about their trip in the order that it occurred. Their first reading material is made in chart form of sentences dictated to the teacher by the children of their own trips and experiences. Children can read their own short sentences very readily because the written record has meaning for them. Reading becomes, as one little boy expressed it, "just talk wrote down". Music, science,

¹Ibid., p. 243.
art, practical arts, and other room activities serve to broaden experiences and heighten interest.

Reading readiness is not a single trait, but a condition of general preparedness or maturity in which many different aspects of living are involved. These are so interwoven and interrelated that they can not be successfully separated. However, the writer has attempted to separate them for greater clarity in discussion. Some of the factors can be fostered by training and experience while others can hardly be influenced by any teaching program, but are brought about by inner maturation. The factors influencing reading readiness that are discussed in this paper are physical, mental, emotional and social.

PART I

PHYSICAL FACTORS

Introduction. - It is most desirable that every child have a thorough physical examination before he enters school. At the present time, however, this is not a school entrance requirement, so many children enter school with physical deficiencies. The public schools are not equipped to give complete physical examinations. It is, therefore, very important that the teacher recognize symptoms of physical imperfections and encourage parents to promote better health for their children.

There are many physical factors that can influence a child's readiness to read. Among these are general health, visual, auditory, speech, and neurological.

If these physical factors improved as the child matures, it would be well to delay reading instruction for a while. However, if not corrected, these physical conditions usually become worse. "Neither good readers nor poor readers should work under physical handicaps which can be corrected." When the defects can not be corrected the teacher must adjust the school program as much as possible to meet the individual's limitations and needs before and after beginning reading.

1 Betts, op. cit., p. 240.
General Health

"The healthy child is better prepared to learn than the unhealthy child. The child who is easily fatigued does not have the energy necessary for continued application to a task."

His attention wanders, he is more easily discouraged, and reading and other learnings suffer. He needs more rest and less activities to conserve his strength.

The five, six, and seven year period is one of frequent illness and absence from school. It is unfortunate that the age when children begin to learn a skill as important to their future lives as reading is, should also be the age of frequent disrupted school attendance.

It has been found that in an average group of one hundred children, one probably has heart trouble, one or two have active tuberculosis, and ten or more are definitely malnourished. The defects that "...have the most pronounced influence on the children's work in school were diseased tonsils, serious eye defects, and malnutrition." These all require medical supervision, and home and school cooperation. If the child is not physically ready then instruction in beginning reading should be delayed until the time the teacher feels the task will not be too arduous."
Visual

Visual acuity is sharpness or keenness of vision as measured by a standard chart at a standard distance. Studies by Eames, Monroe, Farris, Stromberg and others

provide evidence that regardless of age level or tests used, gross measures of visual acuity do not differentiate good readers from poor readers. All investigators, however, concede that, in individual cases, visual acuity should be considered.

It is generally agreed that good vision is essential to comfort during sustained reading effort. Beginning school children have difficulty maintaining their focus very long on tiny objects held close to their eyes because their eyes are immature. If a child's eyes are immature or defective he usually is not aware of it because he believes everyone else sees just as he does. However, if a child has poor vision he cannot be expected to get clear visual images of words, and therefore, he will likely have difficulty in learning to read.

The most common symptoms of inadequate vision are constant readjustment of material being used, squinting of eyes, and rubbing of head and eyes. Sometimes the child sits or holds a book in a peculiar position, or makes odd facial expressions. He might see spots on the page or the words may appear foggy or jump. Most of these visual deficiencies are not easily recognized when a child is given a single vision test at school. If his eyes are rested and he does

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not have to look at the chart very long he will probably be able to read it. Alert teacher observation and tests are our best means of determining the need of further special testing by oculists.

When the parallel rays of light entering the eye do not converge properly, the condition is known as a refraction error. The refraction errors include farsightedness, (hypermetropia), nearsightedness (myopia), and astigmatism. These are all due to structural deviations from the normal shape of the eye and can be corrected with properly fitted glasses. Defects of binocular co-ordination are more easily recognized, but are not as easily corrected.

**Farsightedness**.- The hypermetropia eye is too short from front to back, so that light, especially when coming from a source near the eye, focuses behind the retina. Betts states that 45 to 80 per cent of beginning school children are normally farsighted.¹ "Reading requires the eyes to accommodate to near distances, but little children are not accustomed to long periods of near vision."² It is more difficult for them to focus their eyes on the printed page, the strain causes them to tire more easily, and their attention span is shorter.

**Nearsightedness**.- The myopia eye is too long from front to back, so that light focuses before the retina and

¹Betts, *op. cit.*, p. 67.
²Monroe, *op. cit.*, p. 54.
tends to produce a blurred impression. The child has difficulty with board work, usually plays games less, but often reads easier. Although he can not see distances well, it requires less effort for him to focus his eyes on the printed page. Nearsightedness is easily discovered because the child cannot read the vision chart.

**Astigmatism.** Astigmatism is usually the result of uneven curvature of the front part of the eye, so that light rays coming into the eye are not evenly distributed over the retina. The results are blurred or distorted images and eye strain.

**Binocular Co-ordination.** For normal two-eyed vision both eyes must be focused accurately on the same object at the same time, so a single impression is sent to the brain. Poor coordination is believed to be caused from a lack of balance among the muscles which turn the eyeball. This condition causes "cross-eyes" or "wall-eyes". Milder cases of poor muscle balance occur in which the eyes turn in too much, turn out, or one eye focuses a little higher than the other. When the eyes do not focus correctly the child's vision is blurred, he sees two views at one time, he alternates the use of the two eyes; or one eye is ignored or suppressed. If the same eye is continually suppressed it can cause blindness.

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1 Harris, op. cit., p. 207.
The ability to fix the eyes on a near object after looking at a distant object is called fixation. It is believed that the inability of both eyes to focus quickly and accurately on a near object will also cause a slower reading rate.

Fusion is the merging of visual images so that one object is seen singly and clearly. Poor fusion causes double vision and blurring. In reading, letters and small words are mixed and jumbled, words jump, and it is more difficult to follow the line across the page.

In addition to these there are many ocular conditions caused by injury and disease that may produce poor vision.

The fact that some children do learn to read in spite of rather serious visual defects may mean that, had the defects been corrected early, the children might have been even better readers; undoubtedly they would have been far more comfortable while reading.¹

¹Monroe, op. cit., p. 57.
Auditory
deficiencies among beginning school children are much greater than one would imagine. These deficiencies are caused by birth, accident, or disease. Some of the symptoms for hearing loss are lack of attention, turning of the head, many requests for repetition of directions, and frequent misunderstandings.

As with other defects, the handicapping effect of a partial hearing loss is much greater for some children than for others. Some children make up for their sensory weaknesses by concentrating intently and getting the greatest possible meaning out of what they do hear; others, combining inattention with their sensory loss, seem greatly handicapped.¹

Many infectious illnesses which children have affect their ears, so ear troubles are frequent in beginning school children. "Even though hearing may not be permanently damaged, children sometimes go through periods of temporary hearing loss just at a period critical to learning."²

When a child's hearing is impaired so that he does not understand the teacher's instructions and explanations of new techniques and processes, his reading growth is affected accordingly. Auditory difficulties are attributed to three main causes; auditory acuity, discrimination, and memory span.

¹Harris, op. cit., p. 215.
²Monroe, op. cit., p. 59.
Auditory Acuity. - Auditory acuity is the keenness or power of hearing. A child should be examined for several sound frequencies because Betts found that some children with good auditory acuity could not hear low- and high-frequency sounds. He states that "...a child will experience difficulty in fusing sounds into words if he cannot perceive them."\(^1\)

Because of this a child may not have developed a vocabulary sufficient for beginning reading. He may have acquired faulty pronunciation that causes difficulty in word recognition, or he may mistake one word for another and build up wrong associations.

Auditory Discrimination. - Auditory discrimination is the ability to distinguish between sounds that are similar. The child that cannot discriminate between sounds may have difficulty recognizing the sounds of phonetic elements and be unable to blend them successfully in attacking new words.

Auditory Memory Span. - Auditory memory span is the ability of the child that hears and discriminates sounds to remember them. Research indicates that the tendency to confuse and reverse letters and words decreases with an increase in the age of the child.\(^2\) One index as to the maturation level of the child then would be to test his auditory memory span.

\(^1\)Betts, op. cit., p. 193.
\(^2\)Ibid.
The partially deaf child can be helped by favorable seating in the classroom and good teacher articulation with a well modulated voice. Teaching methods must be suited to the learning abilities and disabilities of the individual child.

Complete deafness interferes with oral reading, but deaf children are taught to read silently by special methods. The amount of hearing loss necessary to interfere with learning to read orally is not known. However, Howes concluded "...a relatively small amount of hearing loss, if undiscovered, might become almost as serious a handicap to educational attainment as congenital total loss."¹

¹Robinson, op. cit., p. 51.
There are many kinds of speech defects, and they are produced by a great many different causes. The importance placed on oral reading determines the extent of the difficulty for the defective child. Stuttering or stammering may cause a child to refrain from talking and thereby retard his whole language development.

Defective formation of the speech organs causes some speech defects. "About 10 per cent of the speech handicaps are due to organic defects."¹ Individuals suffering such handicaps should be referred to clinical workers for treatment.

Some of the common speech defects are stuttering, lisping, slurring, and generally indistinct speech. Stuttering is generally considered to be a complex type of neurotic habit. Defective production of speech sounds may be a result of "...neurological injury, foreign language background, persistence of infantile speech habits, or defective hearing."²

Sometimes it is a disadvantage to insist that a child with impaired speech participate in oral work because he becomes embarrassed and his emotional state.

²Harris, op. cit., p. 499.
aggravates his speech faults. He must be given special help including training in sound production, exercises to develop smoother and more fluent speech, and various procedures to give him greater confidence in himself.

In the meantime, the child with speech defects, if otherwise ready for reading should start to learn to read. There is, however, a problem of adjusting the method of instruction, and the methods used should include those that place oral analysis at a minimum. ¹

¹Bond and Bond, op. cit., p. 29.
Neurological difficulties are caused by damages to, lack of development of, or function of any part of the brain. The two better known results of this difficulty are word-blindness and dominance.

**Word-blindness.** Word-blindness is the inability to read words. There are two types; acquired and congenital. Acquired word-blindness is a loss of ability to read because of injury to the brain. Congenital word-blindness is a lack of ability to learn to read when all other factors are favorable. General intelligence, powers of observation, and reasoning are not affected in true cases of word-blindness. The auditory powers are often above those of other children. It is impossible to teach the word-blind child to read, but there are very few children that have this defect.

**Dominance.** Dominance is the consistent choice of one hand, eye, ear, foot, or side. The dominant cerebral hemisphere is on the opposite side from the dominant hand or foot.

Left handedness may influence the perceptual patterns of the beginning reader since a person watches what his dominant hand does. The left handed person may establish an abnormal pattern of eye movement insofar as reading is
concerned. He may be troubled to an unusual degree with reversal tendencies in reading. "In cases of left hand dominance there should be no change attempted by the teacher for fear of setting up an emotional blocking which is detrimental to any type of learning, and is believed occasionally to be a cause of stuttering."^2

There are many theories of dominance advanced to explain reading disability, but none has been proved. Dominance, however, should be recognized as a possible cause in studying the factors that influence reading ability.

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^1 Broom, *op. cit.*, p. 81.
Summary. - Children have in the past and are at present learning to read that are not physically prepared to profit from systematic reading instruction. These children are not ready because they are physically immature or are defective. Physical maturity can not be rushed, but many imperfections can be corrected. Physical factors affecting reading readiness can be improved by time, instruction, and medical attention. These require school, home, and community cooperation.
PART II

MENTAL FACTORS

Introduction.- Many investigators think that a mental age of six years and six months is necessary before the child should begin to read. The mental age may be interpreted as the chronological age of the average child that has matured physically and mentally at an average rate of growth. The mental age will often differ from the chronological age, according to the child's own developmental pattern of growth.

In every first grade class there will be a mental age range of several years. Yet most children are admitted to the first grade at the chronological age of six years. In their different stages of development first grade children will be ready to begin reading at different times.

The mental age of six and a half years for beginning reading is based on the assumption that the reading program and materials are fixed. Gates believes that the necessary mental age for beginning reading will vary with the materials, the type of teaching, the skill of the teacher, the size of the class, the amount of preparatory

\[1\] Bond and Bond, op. cit., p. 25.
Background of Understanding.—The teacher must begin to teach the child at the stage of growth he has attained during his six or more years of living. Each child is different. His family associations, environment, and experiences have made him so. The child that has been scratched by a cat will attach a very different meaning to the word cat than the child that has owned, loved, and raised a cat. Each child will have his own concept of words. If he has very limited concepts, his vocabulary will need to be enlarged before he will be ready to read.

Some children gain more from their environment than others who are less alert. The number of people in the family, opportunities for travel, the kinds of play experiences, and the place of reading in the home influence children’s background of understanding. The teacher must learn which children have limited understandings and to what extent they are limited. From these needs she will formulate part of her reading readiness program.

Language Development.—Reading is based on verbal understandings and abilities. Children learn to talk by imitating other children and adults. Some children have been reared in homes where they have been encouraged to develop their thoughts verbally. They have had stories read to them, and have learned many nursery rhymes. They have listened to adult conversations, so many words are
familiar to them.¹ These children usually have ample vocabularies for beginning reading.

Other children have had a limited background for language development. The parents may believe that children should be "seen and not heard", so they have had little opportunity to talk at home. To talk freely children must have both the language ability to formulate their ideas verbally, and the emotional security to say what they think.

The only child usually has the most extensive vocabulary because he has had more adult attention. A child in a large family often receives less attention from the parents, so the child imitates the less mature speech of his brothers and sisters.² As a result his vocabulary is less extensive. A child from a home where a foreign language is spoken frequently has a very limited vocabulary. His concepts of things must be translated and a new word learned before he can associate any meaning with the printed symbol. Often the English that is spoken in the home is mispronounced and misused.

Many first grade children have immature speech. "Baby talk" is often fostered by fond parents. Faulty pronunciation and use of words are the results. Children

¹Bond and Bond, op. cit., p. 32.
²Hurlock, op. cit., p. 242.
imitate the word uses and pronunciation they hear, and in some cases copy the speech of their other associates more than their parents. Sometimes by imitating a new adult children learn more correct word uses and extend their vocabularies. Some children need more verbal experiences than others, but for all children, continued growth in vocabulary is important.

**Ability to See Likenesses and Differences.** - The child must be able to see likenesses and differences before he can remember word forms. It is by the process of differentiation in form that words are recognized and remembered. The child is taught this distinction during the prereading period by pictures, puzzles, objects, and observation.

**Ability to Attend.** - As the active six year old begins to adjust to the other children, the teacher, and school he begins to learn to attend to what is being done. The ability to look at, listen to, and concentrate on what is being taught is necessary to beginning reading. "Often lack of attention is due to the fact that the task is too great, the explanation too involved, or because there are distractions in the classroom."  

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1. Ibid., p. 244.
2. Bond and Bond, op. cit., p. 34.
Ability to Sense a Sequence of Ideas.- This ability enables a child to tell a story with the events occurring in the correct order. He can tell his mother of the events of the day in the order of their occurrence. This is taught by asking the child to retell simple, well-known stories with the "What happened next?" question frequently asked.

Ability to Follow Directions.- This ability is dependent on the preceding abilities. In order to follow directions the child must first attend to the directions, sense their sequential order, and then put them into operation. Home activities and responsibilities with parents and others help prepare many children to follow directions.
Summary.- Beginning reading instruction at the mental age of six and a half years does not insure success. Children may be taught to read with mental ages less than six years, but it is a more difficult, lengthy, and laborious process. Morphett and Washburne concluded that

...by postponing the teaching of reading until children reach a mental age of six years and a half, teachers can greatly decrease the chances of failure and discouragement and can correspondingly increase their efficiency.  

1 Harrison, op. cit., p. 7.
PART III

EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS

Introduction.- The social and emotional development of first grade children is just as varied as their physical and mental development. It should be generally recognized that all children that enter school have not had serene and happy preschool years. Some have had oversolicitous parents that have caused the child to be far too dependent. Others have had unwise or inconsistent parental discipline with constant nagging and too frequent thwarting. Still others have not developed socially and emotionally because they have been rejected by their parents or deprived of affection. Some of the aspects of emotional and social maturity which are significant in reading readiness are: emotional stability, self-reliance, the ability to participate actively and cooperatively in group activities, and the desire to read.¹

¹Harris, op. cit., p. 35.
**Emotional Stability.** "The child's emotional balance or imbalance has a definite effect on his ability to learn and to retain what he has learned."\(^1\) Gates estimates that seventy five per cent of specific reading disabilities show personality maladjustments and twenty five per cent the emotional difficulty is a contributing cause of the reading failure.\(^2\) Another writer believes these figures are too low.\(^3\)

The emotionally immature or unstable child feels insecure, worried, fearful, and is usually nervous. It is difficult for him to meet any new situation without additional emotional tension and strain. He needs time and special help to adjust himself to the group and to a new learning situation. "Because of his emotional instability, he is given to demonstrating negative attitudes toward the new learning situation which he encounters in beginning reading."\(^4\) He embroils reading into his general emotional disturbance.

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\(^1\) Monroe, *op. cit.*, p. 22.


\(^3\) Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 233.

\(^4\) Broom, *op. cit.*, p. 83.
Self-reliance.- Self-reliance or the ability and desire to help oneself is a significant aspect of social maturity in school adjustment. Every child has his own unique problems to face as he enters school. Some are better prepared to adjust themselves than others. Almost every child has a few moments of anxiety as he enters a new room and sees new faces. The young child is frequently frightened by the unfamiliar. The child whose parents have encouraged his first fumbling efforts to feed, wash, and dress himself is better prepared to solve the new problems confronting him in a new situation.

The level of emotional maturity attained in the child's life may vary from his chronological age. The child that is emotionally a five year old will be comparatively calm once he is adjusted to going to school.\(^1\) He will like to practice what he already does well, but is not ready to try many new things. He lacks the enterprise for a new and long activity such as reading. He should not be forced into reading. During this "practice period" he develops the emotional security and self-confidence that will lead him into the next stage of his development.

The six year old is characterized by his overestimation of abilities, competition, desire to dominate,

\(^1\) Monroe, op. cit., p. 28.
and his boisterous aggression. He is ready for new fields to conquer. He is a more enthusiastic starter than finisher, because he has not yet acquired the emotional stability for prolonged effort.\(^1\) He tries many new things, and makes many mistakes, but does not mind making mistakes if he is not reprimanded for doing so. He is sensitive and needs encouragement when he fails. He learns by trying and making mistakes are a part of his attempts.

**Ability to Participate Actively and Cooperatively in Group Activities.** The ability to participate actively and cooperatively in group activities is an important social development because much of the work of the primary grades is done in groups. The child that is too shy, restless, or antagonistic to take a normal part in the group activities is bound to miss a great deal. Adjusting to the teacher, other children, and the school situation is a great social development for a young child.

**Desire to Read.** Most children have many experiences with books, magazines, papers, signs, posters, and other reading material long before they enter school. "There is enough social pressure in the school and community to cause most children to want to learn to read."\(^2\)

\(^1\)Ibid., p. 26.
\(^2\)Betts, *op. cit.*, p. 231.
Some children are even disappointed after their first day at school because they have not suddenly learned to read.

A child's desire to learn to read depends upon what his past experiences with books have been, whether he has learned to enjoy them or not, and whether he is growing up normally and welcomes growth.

If he has had happy preschool experiences with printed materials he may express a great desire to learn to read when he first enters school. The teacher must study him carefully to see if the other necessary aspects are present. If they are not she must work toward the development of these abilities and still maintain his interest.

It is especially important that the child's first reading effort be successful. The desire to read alone does not insure reading success. "Lack of desire to read, however, may keep children from achievement even though they possess all the other necessary qualifications to learn." The child may not express a desire to read because he has no need of it. Everything is read to him or for him. There may have been previous unsuccessful attempts to teach him and thus he may have acquired a dislike or fear of reading. He may not wish to read because he receives more attention when he does not.

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1 Monroe, op. cit., p. 31.
2 Ibid., p. 37.
Summary.- The average classroom represents many different families and their backgrounds, which are reflected by the children. Some families allow their children much freedom of choice, action, and teach them independence and self-reliance early in life. Their children are usually better prepared to meet new situations and people.

Some children have not developed emotionally and socially because their families are overly protective, negligent, or divided. These children often need more guidance to help them meet and adjust to new situations and people. The average group of children will range between these extremes.

All young children need to be understood, encouraged, and made to feel wanted. Children that are frightened, worried, or feel insecure can not learn successfully. The teacher then, should provide and adapt teaching procedures that will lead these children toward emotional and social stability and maturity.
SUMMARY

Reading readiness is the stage at which the child can physically, mentally, emotionally and socially profit from systematic reading instruction. Preparation for reading begins long before the child enters the first grade. If parents have corrected known defects, have provided experiences that develop concepts, and provide emotional security in the home, the child should make a satisfactory adjustment in the school situation.

Some phases of readiness can be aided by instruction, but others must await maturation. It is important that we understand some of the factors that influence a child's readiness to read so we can start him at the time when he can achieve success. Most children can progress satisfactorily in reading when the proper degree of maturity is present, and their experiential background is extensive.

Reading is based on language ability, so the concepts of words that have been developed by children's home and community activities partly determine their readiness for reading. For all children to advance at their unique rates of development the teacher of beginning reading must furnish an environment rich in meaningful experiences.
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