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The RAT Pack:

An early reading intervention program

Abstract

Longitudinal studies by this writer have revealed that poor reading compounds itself over the years. For this reason, this writer has developed the RAT Pack, an innovative program of activities for upgrading reading disabled students. It uses a broad spectrum of remedial techniques, interspersed with fun and games. It requires that it be used with a responsible parent, tutor, teacher, or friend.

Reading is one of the most valuable skills to acquire, but many children find reading a great struggle and never achieve a satisfactory reading level. A recent longitudinal study of the skills of 392 children in kindergarten, and their subsequent reading performance over the school years, has indicated that language skills at kindergarten are strong predictors of subsequent reading ability in Grades 1, 2, 3 and 6 (Butler et al., 1985). Path analysis has revealed that the long term influence of these kindergarten skills on later reading is primarily indirect through their effect on reading acquisition in Grades 1 and 2. This finding appears to be favourable for the long term success of an early intervention program in reading. Because the characteristics found in kindergarten have no substantial direct influence on later reading achievement, it should be possible to override these by the influence of intervention programs. The fact, then, that the poorer readers in Grade 1 tend to remain so through the school years points to our inability to provide required remedial reading programs which would lead to these children becoming effective readers.

Evidence of the concern for this is the continuing problem of poor reading skills as seen over the past twenty years with the formation of many

parents' organizations, such as the Association for Children and Adults with Learning Difficulties, which lobbies for additional consideration and help for these children and adults. Many years of work with parents in clinics in several countries has shown that they (i.e., parents) constitute a powerful force for ameliorating reading problems. Parents are the child's first teachers – protecting, nurturing, training, and teaching – long before the school is in the picture. The time has come for the school to actively promote more open parental involvement.

There is considerable research showing the positive effects of parental interest in the child's reading. Both the Dagenham and the Haringey studies in London have shown this to be the case (Hewison, 1985). In Dagenham, a large council housing estate on the eastern outskirts of London, a sample of 300 7-year olds was studied. A large number of factors were found to be correlated with reading success, such as parental attitude, parental language, and IQ, but the factor which emerged as most strongly associated with reading success was whether the parents regularly heard the child read at home. Although a favourable language atmosphere and parental help tended to go together, when the two characteristics were separated out, parental help conferred the greatest advantage.

The Haringey Reading Project took place in the outer London Borough of Haringey under the direction of Professor Jack Tizard. All parents of children in certain "top infants classes" (i.e., children aged 7 or thereabout) were asked to listen to their children read aloud for several periods a week from specified reading material sent home by the classroom teacher. Comparable children acted as controls. Both schools involved were from deprived areas with reading standards below the national average. The intervention lasted two years through the first year of junior school (i.e., until children were 9 or 9+). They found that parents were willing and prepared to provide a support system through the two years, that the majority provided constructive help, and that they avoided counterproductive behaviour such as pushing the children too hard or confusing them with behaviour that was not appropriate. The parents' help was so effective that the children from the experimental group were reading at a considerably higher level than the control group. These reading gains made by the experimental group still had not washed out even by the time they had left junior school at 11+.

For over twenty years this writer has been involved in remedial reading clinics, using different techniques to assist with learning, some more effective than others. Personal experience has shown that it is better to give the parents some responsibility in the remedial area and, hence, get them into positive action rather than let them brood and permit the problem to escalate. Over the years, student power has been used to help these parents and children. Slowly the program called *The Reading Assistance*

Tutorial Pack, fondly termed *The RAT Pack* by the children who use it, has been developed.

The RAT Pack Program

The program provides a systematic step-by-step series of activities, with each step built upon an earlier one. It incorporates hearing, speaking, seeing, writing, and reading. A direct approach, through phonics, provides the students with rules to carry around in their heads to help in the attack on new words. The drill of sight words provides the comfort of being able to recognize some words automatically. Practice in talking about words and their meanings leads to clearer thinking. Good readers seem to be good thinkers.

The RAT Pack has a high percentage of "on task" behaviour. This enables a high level of interactive activity. Inasmuch as children learn to read in many different ways, the program is packed with many varied entertaining and informative activities to help sustain the momentum of parent and child reading, learning, and growing together.

All users must do each exercise from the very beginning because it is necessary to fill in the gaps in knowledge which many of these children have. The content teaches the child about interesting, unusual facts so that classmates may come to realize that the student in question is not as "stupid" as they had once thought.

The child learns coping strategies, many of which in time will become automatic. "Think tanks" are scattered throughout the program to remind the child of a particular rule that can help with the work. Feedback in the different modalities is encouraged, especially in the hearing of the spoken word. Since reading is an acquired skill, there is ample practice for it to become automatic. The program constantly reviews material in different contexts to ensure facts are retained.

The program is presented with as much clarity as possible in order to make it easy to follow and also to make the user feel comfortable with it. The parent is told precisely what to do and when, with minimum effort expended. The material is presented in a positive manner so that it isn't threatening. Helpful hints at the front of the book put the parent on the right track. Further elaboration is kept to the back of the book for those who wish to know more. Simplicity is the motto.

Goals of the Program

The three main goals are: 1) making reading an important and integral part of their lives with lots of reading – the motto is "little and

often" so it is fun and not an endurance task; 2) building a solid sight vocabulary; and 3) incorporating many varied reading approaches in order to provide a variety of methods, because no *one* method helps all children.

Goal 1: Develop a love of books

To achieve the first goal – that of developing a lifelong love of books – to get "hooked on books" – the program moves to open the windows of learning through books and to avoid passivity in the presence of the printed word. Passivity in poor readers is well documented; they tend to skip words they don't understand and to develop a type of learned helplessness, a belief that their actions have no effect on the outcome (Bristow, 1985). The program seeks to help children realize that reading is an important part of life, something that they can be responsible for, satisfied with, and have control over. Through success with the program, the children come to feel good about themselves, not only in relation to simple tasks but also toward those more difficult.

The program capitalizes on the parent reading *to* and *with* the child as well as the child reading *to* the parent. This is simply an extension of the process already in operation in most homes – that of reading together. This action capitalizes on the modelling aspect. Children want to be like the most significant people in their lives, and these are normally parents. Not only do they want to be like their parents, but they want to be loved by their parents. Hence, when parents work in the reading area with children, they are providing very special and potent benefits for skill acquisition in a motivating setting. Naturally, children who read at home regularly get more practice at reading. Reading is a skill which needs practice in order to promote fluency and to minimize forgetting.

The "paired" reading technique, incorporated as research, has pointed to its being a valuable method for parents to use when working with children. It must be noted that paired reading is not just simultaneous reading, it is a method which enables children to move from initial hesitant dependent reading styles to greater independence and fluency. Claims for its success vary (Topping, 1985). A sample study was carried out in Sheffield (U.K.) involving three schools with 28 pairs of pupils (for experimental and control purposes), which were matched for age ($\bar{X} = 12.5$) as well as reading accuracy on the Neale Analysis of Reading Test (Neale, 1963). The pretest means were similar for reading comprehension and rate for both the experimental and control groups. With the experimental group, simultaneous reading was practiced for 15 minutes daily for one week; then the signalling and independent reading was introduced for the remaining five weeks. Gains for the experimental group were in excess of twice those for the control group in both accuracy and comprehension on the Neale Analysis of Reading Test. At retesting one year later, the experimental

group maintained the boost from the paired reading course beyond the control group particularly in reading comprehension and to a lesser extent in reading accuracy (Carrick-Smith, 1985).

Initially, the tutor and child read out loud in close synchrony, the former adjusting to the child's pace. The child reads the words out loud, and any errors are corrected by the tutor reading the word correctly. The child then repeats it.

The second stage of independent reading is when the child feels sufficiently confident to read a section unsupported - the child *nudges* the tutor to indicate a desire to read alone. When the child makes an error, the tutor corrects it and asks the child to repeat it correctly, then they proceed to read simultaneously. The child is not left to struggle - if a word is not read correctly within four seconds, the adult provides the model.

At the outset, most of the reading is simultaneous and any tendency on the part of the child to rush is altered by pointing to each word as it is read.

When reading with the child in this manner, the parent should note the type of errors the child makes. If these are words which are frequently encountered or words that are difficult, but special for the child, the parent adds them to the sight word list for further drill.

Goal 2: Solid sight vocabulary

Sight words are practised at each lesson. They include words that the child will encounter most frequently as well as words that are exceptions to the rules in the program. An automatic sight vocabulary helps to build confidence and makes it possible to use a larger vocabulary in the exercises in the program. Better readers are known to have large sight vocabularies.

Through this writer's experience, a word hierarchy has been built up so at the very outset, the child is exposed to certain words and can begin to read even the simplest of sentences. The words are presented in groups in a way that has been found to be most successful.

Goal 3: Varied reading approaches

Phonics, the method devised to help the child understand the relationship between the speech sounds and the letters of the alphabet, is an essential part of the program. This provides another processing advantage to assist with word recognition. Phonics is an emotive word as far as some reading specialists are concerned, but it should be kept in mind, that the children for which this program has been written are the children who for

unknown reasons were unable to benefit from the techniques incorporated in the present school system. Seasoned reading specialists, like Morris (1982) and Williams (1980), believe that phonics has a place in a comprehensive reading program. In *The RAT Pack*, the phonics skills are practical. Children can see that the rules help them to decipher words. This gives some input toward the feeling that they have some control over the reading process. It also gives the parent some skills in helping the child when an unknown word is encountered. The structured way in which it is presented appears to provide additional security.

What does the phonics approach entail? The child moves through the program, learning letters and combinations of letters associated with their sounds; these in turn are combined to form words. The system does have irregularities. A language is never static, changes are always occurring; pronunciation and spelling gradually alter over the centuries, and new words are added from another language with different phonic structures. When the spelling of some words has no relation to their pronunciation, they are introduced as sight words.

There are some forty significant speech sounds known as phonemes. Use of phonic terminology is kept to a minimum for simplicity; nevertheless, some basic concepts are presented. Essentially, *The RAT Pack* begins with the alphabet and builds up sound and word sequences in a specific order that has been found to be the most successful for the children in this research sample.

Many other techniques are employed throughout *The RAT Pack*, such as closure – reading with gaps – and the building of auditory, comprehension, writing, and thinking skills. While variability and flexibility are the keynotes, a few guiding principles must be followed. Although *The RAT Pack* has been introduced here as a tool for parents, it has also been used in an informal way by teachers, and by students in peer tutoring situations with both children and adults. One of the private boys' boarding schools, Knox Grammar School in Sydney, Australia, has the Grade 10 students using it with Grade 8 students who are having particular difficulty with reading.

The RAT Pack, in an earlier version, was tested in 1980 with Grade 4 students enrolled in three Catholic primary schools near the University of Sydney in Australia. The initial sample consisted of 152 students who were given the GAP (McLeod, 1981), a silent group reading comprehension test which employs "cloze procedure". The forty students, whose scores corresponded to the lowest quartile on this test, were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. Both of these groups received further testing using the Neale Analysis of Reading Test (Form A) as well as the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test, Level 1 (Karlsen, Madden & Gardner,

1966) which purports to assess the various subskills of reading. The University of Sydney students acted as tutors for eight weeks using *The RAT Pack* for three 20-minute periods a week. At the end of the teaching sessions, the experimental and control children were retested on all earlier tests. Tests revealed that, on retest, the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group on the comprehension subtest of the Neale Analysis of Reading Test as well as on three subtests of the Stanford Diagnostic Reading Test – Syllabication, Blending, and Sound Discrimination.

Conclusion

In summary, the principle underlying *The RAT Pack* is the belief that the quickest way to succeed with children is for them to see that they are achieving something, starting with the smallest steps and progressing to larger ones, such perceptions being their own reinforcing agent.

To ensure this progressive success, the parent needs to set aside a half hour of quiet time five times a week for *The RAT Pack*. Since the tutoring is individual, it can be paced to the child's particular needs. An average lesson has a short review of the sight words the child is presently learning. To provide immediate feedback, the time of recall and the number of correct responses is recorded at the bottom of the page and compared with the child's previous record. At the end of the lesson, the snake which has the activity numbers on its body is filled in with the appropriate activity numbers completed so each child can see the progress made.

Recent research by this writer with children in remission from leukemia at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, in 1986-87, has shown improvement of up to 3 and 4 school grades in word reading and spelling, as measured by the Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT) (Jastak & Wilkinson, 1984) over a 4-month period of individual children working with their parents on the program.

The difficulty that many children have in acquiring adequate reading skill has been the concern of educators over the years. *The RAT Pack* has built into it some features which are unique and provide a new slant to the problem.

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