

## *Chapter One*

# **OVERVIEW OF THE BLENDED SOUND-SIGHT PROGRAM**

### **Origins and Development**

The Blended Sound-Sight Program of Learning evolved because of numerous deep concerns which the writer felt as she began her teaching career in the early thirties. Critical of the status quo, she sought to replace by trial and error whatever was not meeting the needs of her students. Among areas examined were the readers, phonics, grouping system, classroom management, means of reinforcement, student involvement in learning, goal-setting, good literature and the amount of student writing. As each area was organized, a program of learning began to evolve, later known as The Blended Sound-Sight Program of Learning.

When the author looks back to 1935 and her first teaching experience in a one-room rural school with forty pupils ranging in age from five to fifteen, in ability levels from very slow to exceptionally quick, in work ethic from sporadic to diligent and in grades from one to ten, many might wonder how she survived the shock of it. Upon reflection, those rural classrooms stand out as a blessing. Since her training had not focused on them, within months she discovered that she had to design a system, organization and management in which children learned and were happy in doing so, in which each pupil had personal goals and objectives clearly in sight and in which co-operation infused the group like an ideal family. The teacher functioned as manager and facilitator. Selecting a couple of students as teacher aids, she focused upon setting up the routines, working with individuals on goals and difficulties at their point of need or in small multi-grade groups with a common problem as well as correcting and marking assignments with the pupils concerned. Functioning as a hands-on manager, the teacher became a spotter to keep the learning process moving forward, the learning environment lively and the learning goals of each child near and clear.

As a believer in the need for reinforcement, the writer sought interesting ways of repetition which would include pupil involvement. This often took the form of card games, frequently prepared by older students and enjoyed by pupils of all grades. As the children manipulated the cards, their learning greatly increased. The writer began to apply this play approach--We Learn by Doing--to make various manipulative games based on the lessons taught. Thus, the embryo of the Activity portion of the Blended Sound-Sight Program began to take shape. It became the central focus on stormy days in the one-room schoolhouse when recesses and noon hours were spent inside. While providing needed skill practice in many subject areas, these manipulative tasks also gave abundant opportunity for children to develop social skills and positive character traits. Once the multiple advantages of Activity Time were realized, it became a permanent part of the classroom organization.

Following many years in the rural schools, the writer moved into a single-graded city classroom where she became more aware of the rigid three reader groups of fast, average and slow. Her management system and philosophy of how learning should take place did not give way to this popular educational grouping technique. It was her belief that fixed groups led to social and emotional problems and that this type of environment was not geared to the development of the positive self-image of its learners. While claiming to be an individualized approach, it became in reality a pacing of a group of pupils through various reading levels which did not meet individual needs. Children learn at different rates and their patterns differ. Consequently, the writer replaced the three group reader system with flexible

groupings which provided for teaching at times to the whole class, to a small group with a common problem, on a one-to-one basis often referred to as the pupil-teacher conference, to an interest area group consisting of brighter students who needed to be challenged and frequently giving children opportunity to work in pairs. Groups were not constant. Once children's problems were solved, the group was disbanded. Flexibility also meant teaching on the spot as situations arose. True individualization does not mean that the teacher walks around the room all day helping each student nor allowing children to decide what, when and how they are to learn. Individualization is not telling parents that they must not worry if their children are behind because they must proceed at their own rate. As one father argued, "without motivation and push his child's own rate could mean standing still for a whole year." Many parents will recognize the frustration which suggests nothing can be done. The flexible grouping system does not mean more work. It means different work with different emphasis. It does not mean more time spent. It means time spent differently. Every teacher is irrevocably committed to the ideal that every child is entitled to his optimum development. Such an ideal cannot be realized by an inflexible type of grouping.

Another concern was that of the restriction of teachers to verbatim teaching styles and techniques as set forth in the reader programs of that time. The writer felt that many problems could have been prevented if more and varied teaching styles, techniques and approaches could have been used freely. Teachers were expected to follow carefully the prescribed program. Those who did not were frowned upon. One of the many issues which arose was "whether or not the alphabet letters should be taught in isolation". The established idea was that they should not. Since children's patterns of learning differ greatly, there was no way in which this one-method approach assured her of that. Then one day something happened. The writer began to listen to the children's comments regarding what they could and could not hear in words. Since the teacher used their ideas, the children became the media for experimentation. As has been mentioned, in most reading programs, teachers were trained and expected to use the prescribed technique as follows: she was to say several words beginning with the same letter sounds such as *get*, *guess*, *gum*, *go*. The expectation was that the children should learn the *g* sound. When the writer employed this technique, she found that the pupils sat there with strange bewildered faces. They could not seem to hear the *g* sound. All at once it came to them and several spoke out saying, "We hear the words but we can't hear the sound you want us to hear." The message was clear. The writer could see that to the children it was like trying to hear a conversation while the radio blasted forth. It was now clear to the teacher what was happening so she turned off the word and said only the *g* sound. It happened and quickly, too. They could hear the sound. The letter *g* was taken out only long enough for pupils to see it, hear it, say it, print it in the air and dramatize it. Then it was put back into the word. She was using all four approaches - imitation, association, kinesthetic and multi-sensory. The writer turned about face in teaching techniques and approaches because she was learning to listen to the pupils.

These results led to further experiments. While discussing the word *green*, the writer said to her class, "You told me what you couldn't hear. Now, tell me what you can hear." Quickly came the response, "ee". Some children responded with "the squealy ee's". It became clear that one should build the words upon the sounds the children hear and then teach the simple basic English rules in a manner appealing to them. Teaching simple rules as the situations arose helped pupils to see how words were built. Even young children can make generalizations. The theory is that you can teach a child at a very young age any concept if you talk at his/her level. The sight words now became phonetic tools to teach the phonics. For example, in *fair*, a *i* says a and comes in the middle of words. In *play*, a *y* says a and comes at the end of words. Soon the children are able to transfer this learning to an unfamiliar word as a thinking process not via memorization. More spelling rules were

developed as teacher and pupils listened and observed sounds within words. The students learned that some rules have exceptions and others do not. No English word ends with *v* so decorate it with an *e* as in *have*. *Er* says *r* at the end of words as in *father* and *teacher* while others such as *doctor* and *dictator* break the rule. Rule breakers ended up in the class jail while words with silent consonants, such as *ghost*, were placed on a large ghost on the wall. The tool sounds or phonic helpers such as the squealy *ee's* were printed on cardboard houses and hung on the wall to provide a resource of sounds, the beginning of Sound City. Experimentation continued as the program took shape.

An additional concern was the restricted cut-off and the timing and pacing of phonics and basic skills at each grade level. For many years the writer had adhered closely to the reading program suggested by the curriculum but often had experienced frustration which seemed to stem from a lack of something vital in the production of independence in reading performance. Consequently, she began to expose children to a wide variety of basic skills in order to meet the needs of pupils with variations of ability. Limitations could be disastrous particularly for the brighter student. Each child was expected to absorb only what he/she could, according to his/her potential without pressure. The writer was convinced that all should not be forced into the same educational diet but that availability was the answer. It became obvious that a successful reading program develops in proportion to the degree of mastery of basics not a few, but many of them, in a variety of interesting situations in all subject fields. Play with the rules. Make them fun but do not hammer them. With an abundance of phonics and spelling rules the writer had remedied the problem of the starvation phonics diet.

As time went on, the writer became discontented with the then current strongly-entrenched programs which relied heavily on the reader as the method of teaching reading. While readers played an important part in the writer's teaching, she found that they did not lend themselves to individual differences and secondly she felt that any program, effective for all pupils, needed to be integrated and comprehensive, incorporating many and varied methods of learning to meet individual needs. As discontent increased, the need for change mounted.

The 1978 edition of this book argued that "The basal reader remains our most important and most rigidly entrenched stumbling block to individualization" because teachers were slaves to the basals and administrators regarded the reader as the heart of the reading program. Teachers often rigidly followed the reader manuals and accordingly organized their classes into groups by reading levels. Workbooks were designed to be used in the same way with each group member doing the same page at the same time. Ironically that was called individualization. The writer found it necessary to deviate from that program of over-emphasis on the basal. She continued to use the reader, not as the experts of the day demanded, but rather, as a tool to teach basic concepts orally. Within the Blended Sound-Sight Program the basal reader became a teaching tool while the classroom library was to feature as the heart of the program. That was 1978.

In 1994, at the time of the fifth publication, what did we find? Readers had become abhorrent to the educational system, especially basals with their controlled vocabularies. Some advocated no reader at all. Others favoured readers supposedly containing good literature but certainly without controlled vocabulary. Everywhere in the early 1990's the theme song had become "Use good literature. Abandon basal readers". The pendulum had swung ridiculously far away from basals and exclusively towards good literature. While in 1978 the writer was arguing for a classroom library of good literature, by 1994, she found herself complaining that in isolation it did not provide a handy teaching tool, especially in grade one. Together, the reader and the classroom library provide challenge, motivation, vocabulary development and a broad educational experience. Both are vital.

As early as the 1950's and the 1960's this writer was calling for and using in her classroom a balance between basal readers and a library of good literature. The problem then was the over-use and abuse of the reader. Today, the author still believes that the balance is essential. Now the problem in the educational system is the over-stress on good literature, too early and too exclusively. Why is balance so difficult to achieve in our schools? The basals originally were wedded to the sight method. Good literature and the library were concomitants of the sound method. The writer's method involved blending sound and sight. Ironically in the 1980's as good literature was being stressed, phonics and the sound method were being attacked and degraded. Such a combination provided a reading disaster for a decade of primary children, a disaster which will plague them as they move upward in the grades. When these same children graduated to the intermediate grades, the uproar became so noisy that many experts began to back down. Hopefully, the pendulum is no longer at either extreme. Balance is all important between sound and sight and between good literature and basal readers.

So, when the idea had never been heard of, the writer dared to set up a classroom library with help from the parents. An uproar was created by educational authorities who asked, "How can you expect grade ones to read library books when many fail to master three pre-primers and three readers?" Ironically today every primary classroom is expected to possess its own library. Again it should not be either-or but rather how to blend the use of both. In the writer's classroom, readers with controlled vocabulary became essential for pursuing the skills of the sight method while building up sound skills so that pupils could move into the library with its uncontrolled vocabulary. Every child - even the slowest - secured entrance to the library demonstrating once again that everyone met the norm for the grade while permitting the majority to advance beyond it.

Goal setting and achievement mushroomed as class library procedures developed in the writer's classroom. To enter the library, each child mastered tasks which were clearly specified, performing activities related to basic skills, applying phonics, obeying punctuation signs in reading and writing, reading with expression, reading from context and developing a sight vocabulary. Once children entered the class library, they strove towards the goal of reading more difficult books which were categorized in levels. Such guided management meant that students ultimately chose books at whatever level suited them. They read to each other in partners in class as well as taking books home. Slower children reached the library later and remained longer in the first and easiest section while the faster moved up the scale, reading more extensively in the higher levels. By April bright students would be reading the classics, some slower ones might still be in easy reading but all would reach the national or provincial norm for their grade. Fifty years ago while the critics complained, the parents rejoiced and the children were happy and excited. Self-image looked after itself. Today the classroom library has become standard but in many schools it is either not used by the lower half of the class or its books provide pictures for admiration. Like most other institutions, the classroom library requires a fixed routine known and followed by all, used and enjoyed by all but managed by the teacher or her student assistants. Every child should clearly understand the series of goals and skills which are required to enter it.

The basal reader is a teaching tool, one among many, possibly not the most important but still too valuable to throw away. The writer used it to teach concepts and basic skills. It provided for oral interpretation, a process of communication of ideas, thoughts and feelings. Reticent and slower pupils were encouraged to make contributions to the lesson orally. Such experiences proved helpful. It gave the children confidence, a feeling of belonging and self-worth, and added greatly to their interest in the lesson. Through unhurried friendly class discussions which encouraged expression of opinion, children developed a sensitivity to ideas, language and author's intent. With guidance and stimulation they began to respond to the emotional tone of the reader story. The reader story of Helen Keller promoted

understanding of a blind child who learned to live happily in a world of sighted people. All pupils were encouraged to appreciate people who face special personal problems. A reader has a variety of reading and social values. A reader with a basic controlled vocabulary provides a quick starter to be used for a limited time. It sets a standard for teachers and provides for choral reading, vocabulary building and drama. These activities foster self-esteem and a feeling of family togetherness to which each child makes a contribution. The reader provides a common framework of reference on which to base reading skills and address social values. The basal reader as a teaching tool is invaluable.

A further use of the reader is helping pupils in oral and written story telling. Children are helped to identify with the story characters and think about what they have done and observed in the past. The teacher has them form vivid mental pictures of story settings, characters and actions. With the added help of the story sequence chart they see the sequence of the story events and grasp their relationship. They size up the motives of the characters in the story and think about how they might have felt or acted had they been in their place. A carefully chosen vocabulary controlled reader can be of the utmost importance for pupils who are beginning to learn to read. The writer used the Dick and Jane readers because they were prescribed at that time. Present day teachers must carefully choose a modern basic reader, such as the Bears Series produced by Marion Ewaskiw and Shirley George, which could be used to accomplish the same goals. Use any reader, use the reader you personally like but *do not throw the reader away*. It is a valuable tool. Use it as a tool but never let it usurp the place of the classroom literature-based library. The writer found that the Dick and Jane readers possessed all the elements necessary for story telling and writing. Centering on children's experiences these realistic stories motivated young children to discuss and write. Although the print did not always include all the facts, the pictures usually represented the elements of a good short story. With the help of the story sequence chart, either the print, the pictures or both were employed to guide the children through the setting, plot, climax and conclusion of the story. Beginning with oral story telling, pupils proceeded to story writing. With this much of an aid from the reader, the writer knew that once children began to write these reader stories she must help them dress up the stories by using many and varied writing styles. For example, the reader may include a sentence such as, "The toad sat down". Any child can improve that. Depending on grade level the child might write, "Expectantly the toad squatted silently at the edge of the rippling pond." Use of "ly" words, a more vivid verb and an adjective provided the writer with a tremendous sense of accomplishment and pleasure. The bare bones skeletal nature of the reader becomes a valuable tool to kick off the reading program early in the year and the writing program shortly after.

Another innovation introduced fifty years ago involved emphasis on good literature through the medium of daily poetry in the primary grades. From time to time skepticism came to the forefront. Sometimes visitors to the classroom would ask, "Why would you require children to read poetry when they are just beginning to read in their reader?" This gave the writer the opportunity to explain the advantages of poetry integration. Poetry appreciation and enjoyment evolved while children increased their skill in reading, comprehension, vocabulary, spelling and phonics. As poetry was intertwined with various subjects such as music, art, drama, social studies and science, phonetic and structural analysis became an integral part of learning rather than an isolated assignment. Even though misunderstanding occasionally occurred in the minds of observers, the writer continued to use poetry to sow seeds of awe, wonder, mystery, compassion and understanding in the hearts of young children. As children read poems, visualized mental pictures and participated in drama, poetry became a powerful tool in making learning to read an enjoyable, meaningful and worthwhile experience.

To compensate for the inadequacy of the workbooks related to basal readers, the Blended Sound-Sight Program developed Individualized Reading and Language Files. These were created to assist each child to move along at his or her own speed and ability without reliance on basals. Workbooks offered a standard diet, in a method which theoretically proclaimed the ideal of individualization. Workbooks were based on the assumption that reading problems of all children were the same and that therefore they all should take the same medicine. Workbooks became the antithesis of the proclaimed ideal of individualization. The Reading Files first diagnose the problem, then send children to different files for assistance, according to their need. For the child with no problem in the specific skill area being diagnosed, he or she turns to enrichment activities. Consequently the Reading Files are truly individualized.

In the early sixties a group of eight teachers and their consultant from Swan River visited the writer's classroom in Yorkton, Saskatchewan where they observed her class of thirty-two grade ones. After this experience and a follow-up visit in the spring they recorded their impressions:

On our arrival what stood out in our minds was that all the pupils were reading with a feeling of joy and accomplishment after only eight weeks of school. Although some of the pupils read slowly and methodically every child had the basic vocabulary under control; no child was stumbling over words. Our excitement heightened as we found some children even at this early time of the year reading books from the classroom library. We were overwhelmed. Sensing our bewilderment, the children soon came to our rescue and explained what they were doing and why they were doing it. Our excitement heightened. As we listened to them read with such expression, stopping to pause at the appropriate places, one of our group reached over to compliment a child on his expressive reading. On the spot the child spoke out, "Our teacher told us that a period is a stop sign so I make sure to stop. Do you see this mark? It's a question mark and that means that you raise your voice." By this time we stood at the back of the room contemplating how we could get Mrs. Ingham to write up her procedures in book form. As we stood there observing the class move independently about the room with efficiency and respect, we were spell-bound. The children seemed to be working toward goals which they understood and were attainable. However we were not aware of what these goals were. When a few pupils noticed our bewildered faces, they volunteered to show us their manipulative activities which they had been enjoying each day. Another child pointed to the Discovery table activity and commented, "When we can do our activities well, we will graduate to Discovery." Another child piped up with, "See the library over there? When we finish Discovery we will be in that class library." Finally we gathered as a group at the back of the classroom once more and spoke to Mrs. Ingham. "These pupils are all reading with a solid basic vocabulary. Many of them are reading with tremendous expression and fluency. They are happy and conscientiously working towards goals. In addition, we are impressed by the way you are using poetry to teach phonics as well as relating it to other subjects in such an enjoyable way for the children. This is a new approach to us but we think it is wonderful. It's early in the year. I wonder if we can come back to visit your classroom in the spring. Maybe we could have you come to our area as a speaker at our Institutes (in-service days). Immediately we sensed that Mrs. Ingham, although pleased with our comments, would rather stay in her classroom and work with the children than to begin to write a book or conduct in-services. However, we felt that there might be a glimmer of hope and so we persistently communicated with her as well as her principal and superintendent. The Yorkton school board considered this invitation as a compliment and agreed to release Mrs. Ingham as a speaker in our district. Since her husband, Austin, being a pilot, conducted flying lessons in Swan River he offered to provide transportation whenever necessary.