

READING INCENTIVE FILMS

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FOR many years Bank Street College in New York City has been concerned with the education of urban children, particularly children in the inner-city public schools. The College has long been a center for preparing teachers to work more effectively in these schools.

More recently, the problem of providing effective curriculum materials has also been of concern. *The Bank Street Readers*¹ were developed in response to the urgent need for reading texts that realistically reflected the multi-cultural, urban experiences of this school population.

In 1964 Bank Street College established an Educational Resources Center in East Harlem. The efforts of this Center were to be focused on the problem of raising the quality of education in a blighted urban area. In a cooperative venture with the New York City Board of Education, the College, through the Educational Resources Center, has introduced innovations in teaching methods and curriculum development, as well as a battery of new materials and teaching aids, in a cross-

section of elementary and junior high schools in Harlem.

Experiment in Change

Essentially the ERC program is an experiment in change process. One highly promising avenue for bringing about change is a new approach to the reading curriculum in the early childhood years: our Reading Incentive Films. These are books-on-film, a sequence of audio-visual materials, developed in the ERC's Communications Laboratory, which apply a new medium to the crucial problem of motivating a child to learn to read.

The plan of the Reading Incentive Films is simple, yet innovative in important ways. Each film presents a children's book of high story interest. An adult reader reads the book aloud directly into camera, and the film alternates between shots of the reader and close-ups of illustrations in the book.

The decision to experiment first in our Communications Laboratory with a series of language arts films was based on several factors. First, teachers and principals in ERC cooperating schools were particularly eager to try new methods and materials in the lan-

¹ *The Bank Street Readers*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

guage arts program; they expressed concern with the fact that present programs still failed to reach large numbers of their pupils. Second, they thought that an important reason for this failure was the child's lack of strong identification with adults in intellectual roles; the children needed experiences which would develop more positive attitudes towards such intellectual activities as reading. Since children generally have positive feelings about television and motion pictures, we believed that film would be an excellent medium through which to provide the needed motivational experiences.

Another consideration was more technical. Books lend themselves extremely well to presentation on film. The illustrations can be projected on the screen for all the children to see while the story is heard. (In this respect, film presentation is probably more satisfying with large groups than the usual classroom story-reading procedures which call for the teacher to read and at the same time attempt to display the illustrations for all to see.) The camera can select or emphasize certain images and to a limited extent can help the child find things in the illustrations which he might have missed in examining the book himself.

A Wider Audience

The films were at first planned for use with primary grade children. However, it soon became apparent that the child audience was not enough. A program which was intended to stimulate increased interest in books and reading should reach parents and teachers as well. The films were therefore designed with these three audiences in mind.

To meet the children's needs it was first necessary to find books that would be appealing and also appropriate for filming. We had a series of meetings with public school teachers, consultants from public libraries, and members of our own College staff, at which books suitable for our school population were selected. (For example, our first films included *Whistle for Willie* by Ezra Jack Keats² and *My Dog Is Lost* by Mr. Keats and Pat Cherr.³) We were able to make arrangements with such publishers as Viking Press and Thomas Y. Crowell to produce the first films on an experimental basis.

Various techniques of filming were considered. In the end, the Communications Laboratory found the following practices to be essential in reaching and involving disadvantaged children:

1. A clear, uncluttered soundtrack should be provided, so as to enable the children to concentrate on the actual words of the story as spoken by the storyteller. In most cases, this means the exclusion of music and other sound effects unless the reader would normally employ them.

2. Cuts from the reader to the book illustrations should be made on strong action words, or sometimes on descriptive phrases. In all cases the cuts should be made, not to create surprise, but to confirm the child's expectation, based on the words of the story.

3. Shots of the reader should emphasize intimacy and naturalness. The camera should capture the reader's natural response to the story and his enjoyment of the act of reading aloud.

In discussing the goals of the film se-

² Ezra J. Keats. *Whistle for Willie*. New York: The Viking Press, 1964.

³ Ezra J. Keats and Pat Cherr. *My Dog Is Lost*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1960.

ries, teachers and administrators in ERC schools gave many reasons for the children's apparent lack of motivation towards reading. They noted that many parents never read stories aloud to their children, and that there was little reading matter of any sort in these homes. Children had few opportunities to observe an adult family member (rarely an adult male) engaged in reading for pleasure or for information. We therefore felt that it was crucial for both the child and the parent audiences to identify as strongly as possible with the story reader in our films.

Importance of Identity

We emphasized the reader in several ways. Nearly half the footage in each film shows the reader actually interacting with the book, often bringing considerable humor and emotion to the telling of the story.

We decided to emphasize the reader's role even more by using celebrities in the films. We felt this would be a particularly effective way of reaching adults, especially if we chose people with whom our audiences would most easily identify. Many well-known people from the entertainment world have already volunteered their services as readers, and figures from the worlds of literature, government, industry and sports will appear in the future. Beginning with Harry Belafonte, who has taken an active interest in the project, these now include Sidney Poitier, Diannah Carroll, Edward G. Robinson, Fredric March, Shirley MacLaine, Langston Hughes, James Garner, and George Maharis.

This year we are testing the films in ERC schools. Initial results are very

encouraging. We find that the films are having a definite impact on poorly motivated children, particularly boys. These children invariably show a high interest in the book presented on film—although they may sometimes do this in a rather unorthodox fashion. (Two teachers have reported that boys have attempted to steal the book, and tales of fist fights over books are not at all unusual.)

It was generally predicted that the screening of a film would initially increase a book's popularity, but no one was sure how long the interest would last. First reports indicate that, with children who are already fairly well motivated towards reading, interest in the filmed book tapers off in about a week. With poorly motivated children, however, and with pre-reading groups in kindergarten and first grade, the film seems to have a more lasting impact; unusually high interest in the book continues for as long as three or four weeks or more.

Motivating primary grade children is, of course, only one of the functions of the films. It is perhaps equally important to influence the parent's attitude toward reading and books, since the child's attitude toward all intellectual activities and his concept of himself as a learner are strongly influenced in the home. We have therefore been especially interested in promoting the use of these films with parent groups and in assessing their impact.

Use With Parents

Principals and guidance counselors in ERC schools report that films in general are often more effective in reaching their parents than guest lecturers or

teaching demonstrations. As one guidance counselor said, "We always get a better turnout when we have a film. . . . I can tell that the meetings (at which films are shown) are a success because the parents look happy when they leave. I think that films must seem less threatening, perhaps because they (the parents) are used to watching television at home. . . . It's difficult to get a good discussion going after a lecture. The parents are far more willing to respond to a film."

Two Bank Street Reading Incentive Films were made available for parent meetings in November of last year, and have been used in several groups. School administrators report that the parents seem particularly attracted by the idea that celebrities have volunteered to appear in films which are being made specifically for use with their children. Discussion leaders say it is easy to go from this idea to a consideration of why it is important for children to hear stories read aloud and of how a parent's attitude toward books affects a child. Parents also seem eager to discuss the reasons why they believe the book which was presented on film would appeal to their own children, and they express considerable interest in obtaining the names of other books which might also appeal to their children.

We are also interested in determining the effect of the films on teacher behavior, particularly with those primary grade teachers who do not hold regular story-reading sessions but who indicate that they would like to do this with their classes. (These teachers may be

inexperienced and may lack confidence in their ability to hold a group's attention by reading aloud.) The films do not, of course, replace the teacher as story reader. However, they do kindle a child's enthusiasm. (Children almost always ask their teacher to reread a book which has been presented on film, and these requests may continue for weeks.)

We had anticipated that insecure teachers would be able to capitalize on the excitement of the films, and this has, in fact, proved to be true. As one such teacher remarked, "It is so much easier to read a book when they ask for it. Then I know they're interested, so I don't worry about whether I can hold their attention." A few teachers are reporting that they now read twice as many books aloud.

We are continuing to introduce Reading Incentive Films in ERC schools this year on an experimental basis. At the same time we plan to experiment with different filming techniques and methods of film presentation to determine which are most effective with this population.

In addition to film for standard projectors, we are experimenting with the use of the films in the new 8mm cartridge machines for individual viewing, and are now studying the impact of this device on classroom instruction and teacher behavior. In the course of our observations we hope to find out a great deal more about the response of children and their parents—particularly among disadvantaged families—to films as a motivational medium. ☞

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