

CHILDREN, COMPUTERS AND READING SKILLS

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While a fierce scholarly debate is going on in Israel between the followers of The Whole Language method and the great believers in the phonetic system as the panacea for all the illnesses connected with reading acquisition, a group of fourth graders tutored another group of first graders, in reading, in an intuitive manner and not using or being aware of any specific method in particular. They did it , though, with a lot of love, individual attention and using the computer.

Though the tutors worked with relatively top students, some of whom were already readers, one could draw conclusions from the described case study which could be applied to the advancing of the reading acquisition process in general, and to other learning areas as well.

Some background

Sara is a first grade teacher at the Alon School at Mate Yehuda, in Israel. Sara's class is very heterogeneous. In the beginning of the 2001-2002 academic year Sara needed some help with the better first grade students. She felt these students were in need of a faster pace as far as learning how to read is concerned, as they knew how to read and write in the very beginning of the year.

Sara is a fan of computers . She is also a great believer in the idea of older children tutoring younger ones. Sara decided to ask three of her former students, fourth graders as of this year, to tutor the more advanced first graders and to help in accelerating even more the latter's reading abilities.

Sara asked for volunteers. A few fourth graders did.

Since Sara was their homeroom teacher for the last three years, she was well acquainted with the abilities and personality of the tutors to be: Sara chose the most sensitive and patient students.

The assignment

Sara met with the "young tutors "a couple of times and asked them to work with the first graders via the computer, using mainly" Word".

Sara asked the young tutors, to work specifically on the following:

- to recognize and to find the letters of the alphabet
- to recognize the final letters

(In Hebrew there are two sets of letters, according to the place of the letter in the word. If the letter is in the beginning or the middle of the word its shape differs from when it appears at the end of the word. This is true of the following letters: KAF, MEM, NUN, PEH, and TZADI)

- to master punctuation: to understand the function of the period and the spaces

In addition to the above the "young tutors" were asked to teach the younger children how to write a very short "paper" using WORD, and how to download pictures and to combine

them with their writing.

Today's children and computers

Today's children are accustomed to computers; for them the computer is a "playmate" "workmate", an integral part of their lives.

It's a well-known fact that children nowadays master computer skills at a very early age and often better than adults. Our youngsters also master many qualities usually attributed to grown-ups.

In his book *Growing Up Digital*, Don Tapscott describes today's youngsters, whom he calls the N-Generation (net generation), as:

Tolerant, curious, assertive and more self-assured and emotionally and intellectually open

The Net Generation summarizes Tapscott, is a generation that combines the values of humanism with societal and technical aspects.

The aforementioned characteristics, being emotionally open, self-confident, tolerant and curious, combining humanism with technical aspects, make the N and digital generation almost "ideal teachers" while using the new technologies.

The process

The very idea of using the computer as a means for tutoring and for learning was met with great enthusiasm on both parties involved in Sara's project- the first graders as well as the older fourth graders.

Soon, a few more first graders joined the strong readers' group and more fourth graders volunteered for the tutoring job.

The children worked in pairs: a fourth grader with a first grader.

They met once a week.

The mixed group of tutors (fourth graders) and their tutees (first graders) found some more avenues for collaboration: they typed poems for the entire class, made posters for the Holidays, and made, using "WORD", puzzles for the first grade class.

Making progress

"The progress the children in my class made", says Sara "was amazing, in comparison with former years, as each child had his own private tutor, who worked with him/her according to his/her pace and interest. The teacher can't do this to the same extent. The teacher has to spread himself/herself thin to all the 30 children in the classroom."

Sara went on: "A child treats another children very seriously. If a child, makes a mistake the tutoring child explains the mistake, from a child's point of view."

And then she added: they simply love using the computer."

Problem solving skills

The new technologies prompt us to redefine many aspects in our life in general and in school life, in particular. There is a shift in the role and place of children: Children mastery of the computer and the language of high-tech put them in a new status, unknown in the past. In many schools children become "young computer technicians", as they maintain school computers and in many others they serve as "young computer teachers" and tutor other children in various subjects.

In a survey conducted in 2002, by NSBF in 90 schools in the US, "Fifty-four percent of the

schools surveyed said that students provide technical support and 43 percent said students troubleshoot hardware and software problems." Not only do the new technologies redefine the role of students but they also usher what might be a new pedagogy which places much emphasis on the inter- personal element , on values and on children becoming partners in the educational process.

Children who tutor others, be it children or adults, learn the values of tolerance, patience, giving and understanding the other.

They also learn problem solving and conflict resolution and management as they might encounter difficulties arising from their new role.

The fourth graders who helped Sara's first grade students, encountered such a difficulty: one of the first graders was too demanding and tended to monopolize much of their time, while the other first graders who were less demanding , got less of their time.

The fourth graders made two on the spot decisions, without involving Sara in them:

a. they called the "demanding child" for a meeting in which they explained to him with great patience that he is too demanding. b. they re-organized, so that the most patient child amongst them would tutor the most demanding one.

It would be needless to point out how much they learnt from this experience.

Plans for the next academic year

Amazed and encouraged by at the" fantastic" results and the simplicity of the intervention, Sara says she would like expand the project to the entire first grade,in the next academic year: she would like the entire first grade to be tutored, on a regular basis, by the fourth graders. Sara would like the fourth graders to tutor the first graders not only in reading while using the computer, but also in writing and in making power point presentations, in the very first semester of the first grade. Sara believes that using this method, which is quite common in many schools, her first graders could start using the internet, in a meaningful way, already in the second half of the first grade.

She adds : "what we usually teach in the third grade could be taught in the second ...we could really accelerate the learning process ".

An end note

Sara started the project intuitively, out of a need to further advance the reading knowledge of a group of top students, for whom she as a teacher to many in a heterogeneous setting, had difficulty finding the time ,attention and resources.

Sara's case is in no way unique. In many schools older children tutor younger ones in a few areas. This trend could be developed into a more systemized and organized method to be used on regular basis intra- schools and inter- schools, especially if we combine the abilities that today's children possess with a vehicle most children love: the computer. I believe that the new technologies help in paving the way to a new pedagogy, a "softer"one, less controlled by adults and in the venue of what Sugata Mitra calls" Minimally Invasive Education" as he believes that "children are capable of studying a range of subjects, not just computers, in a very fun-inspired and self-taught manner." "In doing so, they're also learning how to 'self organize' themselves, setting norms of group behaviour, setting their own goals". (Techknowlogia, June 2002)

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