

Problem learners find hope in R.E.A.D. *

By PAUL DE GROOT
Columnist Reporter

One student sells and repairs computers. Expert in computer languages, he writes English at the Grade 2 level.

Another is a highly skilled tradesman for whom promotion is blocked because he can't read at all. In fact when he came to the Victoria Reading Evaluation and Development Society (Victoria R.E.A.D.) he didn't even know the alphabet.

Try this: "Once upon a time there was a princess who lived in a castle."

Cases like these come through the door at 1156 May all the time. They have normal intelligence but for one reason or another have never been able to make the mental leap between ink on paper and words in their minds.

FREQUENTLY THEIR problems can be traced to a specific deficiency. They may have a poor memory for sounds or shapes. They may be unable to discriminate between some similar sounds. They may have trouble remembering sequences.

Such problems are called "specific learning disabilities," a technical term which disguises problems that can drastically affect an individual's education, and life.

"It was hell there and most people don't even know what is a hell," is how one R.E.A.D. student described his school experience, recollects Brenda Laurie, R.E.A.D. co-ordinator. That may have been the reason he quit school at Grade 6, still unable to read.

Formed two years ago by parents concerned that their children could not get good remedial teaching, R.E.A.D. is a unique non-profit organization which provides learning assistance for children and adults who have reading difficulty.

THE LOGICAL question is—doesn't the public school system have learning assistance programs for children?

It's a good question, and a delicate one, because while Victoria R.E.A.D. is officially ignored by the regular education system, it has strong informal connections with both educational administrators and individual teachers who turn to it for help.

To put the matter bluntly, the school system's learning assistance classes are too little and too late.

"Since our clinic opened its doors there has been a steady increase of student enrolment from the schools in the local districts. In desperation, parents have been willing to pay the required fees because the academic needs of their children were not being met," the society said in a brief at a hearing on teacher training last December.

R.E.A.D.'s predecessor, Project Catchup, was an attempt to solve two problems at once. Supported by a federal grant, it took unemployed teachers and gave them training and experience in learning assistance with children who needed it.

THAT RELATIONSHIP continues informally today. Many learning assistance teachers in Greater Victoria schools still ask for R.E.A.D.'s assessment of a pupil, and schools co-operate by giving students time to attend classes at R.E.A.D.

What makes R.E.A.D. different from learning assistance teaching in the public schools are qualifications and intensity, Ms. Laurie said.

Diagnostician Charlotte Etches has a master's degree in language and learning disabilities, and has taught at the post-graduate level in university. R.E.A.D.'s five full-time teachers, who design and execute learning plans for students based on the diagnosis, all have teaching certificates and advanced training in learning disabilities.

A half-day a week is spent in upgrading themselves, and R.E.A.D. staff regularly hold special seminars for teachers across the province. They are now working on a program to train community college adult education instructors.

UNLIKE LEARNING assistance classes in the public schools, where teachers work with up to eight students at a time, classes at R.E.A.D. never exceed three, and only reach that size if students with very similar problems and reading levels come along at the same time.

Small classes are important in learning assistance, Ms. Etches says. They enable the teacher to correct every error the moment it is made, rather than a few minutes later when the impact is lost.

Because of the highly specific program worked out (29 different diagnostic tests are

used) and the small classes, barriers to reading fall rapidly. Results so far indicate that for every month spent at Victoria R.E.A.D., the student gains about three months on his reading score, Ms. Laurie said.

This rapid progress works real changes in students, and parents who have tried "everything" and given up hope are understandably pleased.

THE RAPID PROGRESS is an important factor in keeping R.E.A.D. going. Teachers who see major changes in their pupils find that the personal rewards go a long way toward making up for pay lower than that offered in public schools.

Still, Ms. Murray says, "dedication and hard work go far, but somewhere along the line you need help."

Tuition, which works out to about \$160 a month, provides only half of Victoria R.E.A.D.'s budget. The rest comes from some grants and donations.

What R.E.A.D. wants now, she says, is some recognition from the community for the work it is doing.

"We would like recognition from the education ministry that we cross age and school district boundaries, and train

teachers from all over the province. From the community, we would like recognition that we are the only non-profit society dedicated to this."

THE IMMEDIATE NEED is for space, preferably for a large house with many rooms in which small classes could be held. The program began with four students, and less than two years later has 60. A

special summer program has attracted another 280 students.

The lease at 1156 May is up at the end of June. The summer program will be held at Blanshard school for which the Greater Victoria school board is charging the society \$1,200 and come September, another building will be required to house an expanded program.

A longer-term need is for

more permanent funds, mainly so that tuition fees can be reduced.

"The students who come here are the lucky ones. Their parents really care about their education and can generally afford to pay a lot extra."

Those who can't afford and can't get one of the limited number of scholarships are the losers, in education and probably in life.