



MACRAE: It takes courage

Not being able to read similar to being blind

By Grania Litwin
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Not being able to read is like being blind, says Linda Macrae.

"It means a person can't read a menu in a restaurant, can't read a telephone book or a road sign."

And they are usually in the dark as far as employment possibilities: "Non-readers are either chronically unemployed or have to work at unskilled, menial jobs," said Macrae who is executive director of the Victoria Reading Evaluation and Development Society.

The society, which has branches in Sidney, Fairfield and Langford, is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. Since 1977 its staff, who all have at least a bachelor of education degree plus special training in remedial education, have taught more than 5,000 people to read.

The students are all ages — everything from six to 60.

Two Grade 11 girls recently signed up for classes. They were both reading at less than the Grade 2 level. "Sometimes it just makes my stomach drop when I meet youngsters

like this. It takes a lot of courage for them to come for help."

Macrae described a 43-year-old man who came to R.E.A.D. a few months ago: "He was a non-reader, had barely achieved a Grade 1 reading level and was unable to use even the most rudimentary reading skills to get by.

"He had dropped out of school at 13 because the teachers said he was stupid, and was a truck driver until a serious back injury put him out of work. Because he couldn't read he couldn't take vocational training so

the Ministry of Labor referred him to us."

For five months the man attended classes and began to read at the Grade 5 level. Today he is taking vocational training at Camosun College and speaking to street kids on the problems of not being literate.

"He had a very severe learning problem but he worked very, very hard to compensate."

Statistics show that from 10 to 15 per cent of the population have moderate to severe learning problems, said Macrae.

An elementary child might have difficulty expressing his ideas, a teenager might be perplexed when asked to follow directions or an adult might express thoughts verbally with ease but falter when trying to put words on paper.

"Quite often a student is able to do quite well in the lower grades but when bigger words are introduced he or she has no strategy for decoding them and so falls further and further behind.

"Sometimes a student will reach high school without being detected. There are many adults with learning problems who are only now aware of what is wrong."

The expert stresses that in almost every case a person with a learning disability is of average or greater intelligence. This is why, so often, they can avoid detection.

"They develop strategies which help to mask the problem and often display great awareness in other areas — many are high achievers in a particular area.

"But more often than not, a child or adult having difficulties begins to lose confidence and self-esteem and wonders why he or she is different."

The techniques practised at R.E.A.D. are as varied as the problems themselves — each one is tailor made to unravel an individual problem.

All students are evaluated to determine their learning strengths and weaknesses. Classes are small and intimate.

"We always begin at a level where a student can achieve success. Our phi-

losophy is that everyone can learn in the right environment. We want to make it a positive experience, to build confidence and self-esteem. Once they start to enjoy themselves we see progress."

Macrae points out the key to unlocking the problem is a multi-sensory approach: "Some students read well but don't comprehend spoken language. Others may have superior verbal ability but can't write a sentence. Others may learn well from visual examples but struggle when asked to follow instructions in point form.

"The solution is to develop other avenues of thought process to bring each sensory ability up to the same level."

Young children may be asked to sculpt numbers out of plasticine and feel the shapes with closed eyes until they are imprinted. A sequencing difficulty may be unscrambled by visual exercises and concrete physical processing of information.

Exercises are imaginative, creative and repetitive.

Macrae emphasizes that parents must become advocates for their children. Many learning troubles are spotted in schools but parents should also be on the alert to act if they suspect learning problems.

The sooner a difficulty is spotted the sooner it can be remedied — before behavioral or social ramifications develop.

"The earlier we catch it the better, before the learning problems are entrenched and the student has fallen too far behind. Never before has

reading been so important — there are fewer and fewer unskilled jobs out there."

Besides celebrating its 10th anniversary, the society is embarked on a fund-raising campaign to earn money for bursaries. Donations are tax deductible and help fund classes for those who have difficulty paying.

"Last year we gave away \$25,000 in bursaries."

The society is supported by the provincial government, United Way and individual donations as well as fees for classes.