

Turning Words Into Meaning

8-Year-Old Makes a Determined Journey Into Reading

By JACQUES STEINBERG

There are few books in La-Toya Pankey's apartment on 102d Street near Amsterdam Avenue in Manhattan, and even fewer places for an 8-year-old girl to steal away to read them.

There is no desk, no bookshelf, no reading lamp or even a bureau in La-Toya's small room, one of only two bedrooms in the apartment she shares

Room 3-223

One student's story

with seven other people: her mother, her five sisters and her infant brother.

At night, there is little light, save a couple of bare bulbs mounted on the peeling, beige walls. And there are few places to sit, beyond a lone, wooden chair at a battered kitchen table, which La-Toya must wait her turn to occupy.

Yet there was La-Toya, on a rainy evening earlier this month, leaning against that table and reading aloud, flawlessly, to her mother from the Roald Dahl classic "The Witches," which she had borrowed from the makeshift library in her third-grade classroom.

For La-Toya, as well as her teacher, Ted Kesler, it was an important moment: after reaching for first-grade-level books like "One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish" well into the fall, La-Toya had recently begun to take on, and understand, books like the "The Witches," which is di-

vided into chapters and written for children two years older than she.

"I would have thought that book was too hard for her," said Mr. Kesler, shaking his head as a visitor to his classroom, Room 3-223 at Public School 75 on the Upper West Side, recounted the scene to him the following day. "It's remarkable that she is reading that well."

The tale of La-Toya's success, with all its fits and starts, is as illustrative as any other of the forces that must come together, and the hurdles that must sometimes be vaulted, for a third grader to im-

prove her reading.

Like rock climbers scaling a peak, La-Toya and the 30 other students in Mr. Kesler's class, who are to return from Christmas break today, are at various stages in pursuit of the goal that Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew has set for every third grader: to be able to read and discuss books written at their grade level by spring. It is an achievement that fewer than half of the city's third graders accomplished last year.

La-Toya, a small girl who pulls her thick hair back into a tight knot with a rubber band, is one of many in the class who are making some progress toward meeting the standard.

To be sure, Mr. Kesler has played a vital role: he has huddled with La-Toya several times over the last three months, imploring her to set aside Dr. Seuss for more challenging books; he has spent dozens of hours reading aloud with her and her classmates, teaching them to extract meaning from the printed page, and he has practically laid books in their hands, encouraging each student to take home a book to read for at least 20 minutes every night.

But the overriding factor in La-Toya's success, Mr. Kesler says, is La-Toya herself, and her determination to read.

La-Toya likes to read late into the night, her flashlight glowing underneath the thin blue blanket atop her metal bunk bed. She also reads while walking down 102d Street, often oblivious to puddles as she moves farther from her apartment at the Frederick Douglass Houses project.

She reads, she says, whenever she can, mostly as an escape from a life that is rarely easy. "A book is like a friend," she said. "When you're lonely and no one wants to speak to you, you can go read."

A New Class

From 'Too Easy' To 'Just Right'

It was, La-Toya said, a lonely time for her when she entered Room 3-223 for the first time in September. While the other children had friends in the class, La-Toya knew no one.

"When we chose partners for lining up to go to lunch, she never had one," Mr. Kesler said. "She was afraid to ask. I usually had to find someone for her."

She showed a similar timidity in

her reading. One of the ways Mr. Kesler monitors the children's reading at home is through a log, in which each registers, each night, the title of the book she is reading, the number of pages read and any comments.

La-Toya's early entries show that she was picking quick, first-grade-level books with lots of illustrations, including "Disney Babies at the Big Circus," on Sept. 26 and "Where is Mickey's Red Ball?" on Sept. 27.

It was difficult for Mr. Kesler to tell at first whether these books were challenging La-Toya, because she rarely spoke during class. But when the children began breaking off into pairs to study the third-grade-level book they were reading as a class, "The Mouse and the Motorcycle," Mr. Kesler could tell, from eavesdropping on La-Toya as she read aloud, that she was sailing through it.

On Oct. 25, during the 30-minute class period devoted to independent reading, Mr. Kesler motioned La-Toya over to a small wooden desk.

She had selected "One Fish Two Fish" to read, and Mr. Kesler first asked her whether she considered the book "too easy," "just right" or "too hard."

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"Too easy," La-Toya quickly said. "What makes this book too easy for you?" he asked.

"The words," she said.

"Why did you pick the book, if it was too easy?" Mr. Kesler asked.

"Because I like it," she said.

Mr. Kesler then asked La-Toya to follow him to a set of bookshelves, where hundreds of titles were arrayed in categories like "quick reads," "chapter books" and "scary stories."

He selected several chapter books for her, including "Kimako's Story," by June Jordan, which is about a 7-year-old girl who, like La-Toya, is black and lives in a city apartment.

Four days later, La-Toya logged on her reading chart that she had finished the thick book. She talked about Kimako's mother being too tired to braid the girl's hair — just as her mother is sometimes too tired to braid her hair.

"Did you read every word of it?" her teacher asked her. "The whole thing? If you didn't, tell me."

"I read all of it," she replied, "on Friday when I got home."

Mr. Kesler beamed.

But the question immediately became: could Mr. Kesler make the habit stick?

Working at Home

The Obstacles For a Young Reader

Ted Kesler, a 35-year-old marathon runner who wears the wire-rimmed glasses of a scholar, has been teaching for nine years. And if there is one thing he has learned, it is that what students do at home is critical to maintaining their success in the classroom.

"It's the same thing as a violin teacher," he said. "In that half-hour lesson, the student sees what is possible with the violin — 'Look at this beautiful song I can learn.' But you have to practice those scales every day and work on your bowing technique."

It is not always easy for La-Toya to practice.

There is little to read in her house, except for a stack of Young and Modern magazines that belongs to

her mother, a few slim spiritual books like "Live Forever," and one of the only children's books the family owns: a 30-year-old story titled "Sea Beach Express," its back pages torn out and its cover stamped "Discarded: Salvation Army."

La-Toya's mother, Veronica Pankey, 32, who graduated from Bayside High School in Queens, says she wishes she had more money to buy books for her seven children, ages 9 months to 12 years old. She has been on public assistance virtually full time since 1987, when, while pregnant with La-Toya, she walked out on the girl's father. Several weeks ago, she said, she began working part time at a drugstore, for \$4.50 an hour. "It is a struggle in my life," Ms. Pankey said, "but I try to keep on keeping on."

She refers proudly to La-Toya as her "whiz kid" and "little bookworm," interrupting her third daughter's reading only when it is time to clean up the apartment. And Ms. Pankey attempts, although it is sometimes difficult, to quiet her children for some extended period each night for "peace-of-mind time."

Yet in school, something has been holding La-Toya back.

She usually weaves through class unnoticed, wearing a pair of green or violet corduroy pants, and a matching turtleneck. But occasionally she gets into trouble.

On the eve of Halloween, the day after she finished reading "Kimako," La-Toya suddenly and dramatically flopped to the floor outside class, as the children waited to file in after recess. Mr. Kesler determined that there was nothing physically wrong with her and, after failing to persuade her to get up, hauled her to the main office, where she spent the rest of the day.

The next morning, he held her back from gym class for a half-hour, trying in vain to get her to tell him what happened. No matter what the question, she only pursed her lips.

Finally, Mr. Kesler asked her to signal with a nod if she had staged the fall because she had been upset about something. She shook her head no. Then he asked, "Did you do it because you thought it was funny?" She nodded.

"I said, 'Good, now we know that's not a funny thing to do,'" Mr. Kesler recalled later.

"You can't teach her when she is like that," he added. "It's like a blockade."

A Higher Level

The Challenge Of 'Hard Books'

But in the weeks that followed, throughout November and into early December, something noteworthy happened: the books that La-Toya began choosing to take home were increasingly challenging.

On Nov. 8, she reported reading the first 15 pages of "You Can't Eat Your Chicken Pox, Amber Brown," an early third-grade book; on Nov. 21, she logged her reading of the first 39 pages of "The Barking Ghost," a fourth-grade-level book in the popular "Goosebumps" series, and on Nov. 25, she reported reading from pages 7 to 85 of "The Witches," which was written for fourth and fifth graders.

"Mr. Kesler taught us not to read baby books," La-Toya said, "to pick

hard books."

And if she occasionally picked up something lighter — like a "Calvin and Hobbes" comic book, as she did on Oct. 30 — that was O.K., too, Mr. Kesler said. "It's like saying, 'I'm going to exercise for an hour and then have ice cream for dessert,'" he reasoned.

The only lingering concern, Mr. Kesler said, is the periods when La-Toya avoids books for several days.

Scratched in pencil on her reading chart on Nov. 28, Dec. 3, 4 and 5, for example, are the words "I did not read."

On Dec. 5, Paul Bauer, a student teacher who had been reviewing the reading charts for Mr. Kesler, confronted La-Toya about why she had stopped reading. She refused to answer and did not speak to Mr. Bauer for the rest of the day.

Neither Mr. Kesler nor Mr. Bauer could determine the root of the silence. And La-Toya's mother fared no better several nights later.

"What is it that is wrong with you, when you shut us out?" Ms. Pankey asked La-Toya in front of a visitor. "Did something happen?"

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La-Toya merely clenched her lips.

The next night, La-Toya was reading again, this time an installment of the popular "Boxcar Children" series, which is on her grade level. And she has read, pretty much without interruption, ever since.

In fact, La-Toya has become such a good reader that she has recently begun to share her skills.

Over breakfast last week, she picked up "Pippi Longstocking," which her 6-year-old sister, La-Timmah, had received as a gift, and opened to a page.

"Come on, Timmah," she said, "try."

Her sister, a first grader, shook her head.

"From right there," La-Toya said, pointing, "where it says, 'When the policeman...'"

"But I don't know how to read," La-Timmah said, cutting her sister off.

And so La-Toya began to read aloud, as her sister sat rapt.

Mr. Kesler had witnessed a similar scene.

On the Friday before Christmas vacation, La-Toya pulled down the third-grade book "You Can't Eat Your Chicken Pox, Amber Brown." She sat next to her classmate Simone Trahan, who is reading well, but not as well as La-Toya, and they began to read together.

It was a moment that evoked the essence of teaching, Mr. Kesler said, one when he knew a student had heard what he had said and absorbed it.

"I basically take the approach that I'm going to inundate them from every angle and variation," Mr. Kesler said, "sort of like pelting them with hailstones. Some of those hailstones penetrate."

What La-Toya Is Reading

The pupils in Ted Kesler's third-grade class keep a daily log of the books they take out of the classroom to read at home. Their choices provide one measure of how they are progressing. What follows are several titles noted in the log of La-Toya Pankey, 8, as well as a brief description of each

Oct. 7

TITLE: "Amelia Bedelia and the Surprise Shower"

DESCRIPTION: Part of the popular "I Can Read Series" for young readers, the story of a hapless maid has lots of pictures and the print is large. But humorous double meanings make the book more appropriate for children in late second grade. "That was a good choice by La-Toya," Mr. Kesler said.

TYPICAL PASSAGE: "There was a knock on the back door. 'Coming, coming,' called Amelia Bedelia. She opened the door."

Oct. 23

TITLE: "Danny and the Dinosaur"

DESCRIPTION: This tale of a boy who climbs on a dinosaur's back in a museum and rides him out the door is written on the first-grade level, with only a few simple sentences on each page.

TYPICAL PASSAGE: "I wish we had a boat," said Danny. "Who needs a boat? I can swim," said the dinosaur.

Oct. 29

TITLE: "Calvin and Hobbes"

DESCRIPTION: Although the book is a compilation of the popular comic strip, Mr. Kesler said the language, sentence structure and humor are sophisticated - so much so that only a student in the sixth grade or above could understand all of it. This is one of La-Toya's favorite books.

TYPICAL PASSAGE: "What's all this noise? You're supposed to be asleep! It was Hobbes, Dad! He was jumping on the bed! Honest!"

Nov. 25

TITLE: "The Witches"

DESCRIPTION: La-Toya's triumph. This 208-page classic, about the exploits of a gang of witches, is divided into long chapters and usually recommended for children in the fourth or fifth grade, Mr. Kesler said. "Reading that, compared to 'Danny and the Dinosaur,' is remarkable," Mr. Kesler said.

TYPICAL PASSAGE: "The very next day, in order that we might both try to forget our great sadness, my grandmother started telling me stories."

January 10, 1997

20 Colleges Join Clinton Effort to Battle Illiteracy

By Douglas Lederman

Washington -- Twenty college presidents have committed their work-study programs to President Clinton's campaign against illiteracy. They have agreed to set aside half of their new work-study positions for students who want to tutor children in reading.

Mr. Clinton named the 20 presidents to a panel that will oversee higher education's role in the Administration's new literacy program, known as "America Reads." The program, which the President announced during his campaign last August, is aimed at enlisting a million volunteer tutors to teach students to read. Last month, Mr. Clinton appointed a key White House aide, Carol H. Rasco, to oversee America Reads as a senior adviser to Education Secretary Richard W. Riley. Ms. Rasco was the President's domestic-policy adviser in his first term.

Mr. Clinton said in October that he hoped that up to half of the \$213-million increase in work-study funds that Congress appropriated for fiscal 1997 would go toward supporting the literacy program. In a weekly radio address last month, he said the commitment by the 20 presidents would "give us thousands of new tutors, a down payment toward our goal of enlisting 100,000 work-study students to help America read."

George M. Dennison, of the University of Montana, is among the 20 college presidents. He expects many other students on his campus to volunteer for the literacy effort in addition to those who will tutor children in exchange for government assistance, he said. "We're talking about mobilizing the entire campus," he said.

To entice colleges into the program, the President altered federal rules in November so that institutions no longer must pay a quarter of the work-study cost for students who tutor children in reading. The government will now pick up the full tab for those students.

Most college officials endorse the goal of using work-study students for America Reads and the approach taken thus far. But some student-aid administrators worry that what is now an opportunity will soon become a requirement.

While they are thrilled by the new money that Congress appropriated for work study this year -- \$830-million, a nearly 35-per-cent increase over the \$616.5-million appropriated for fiscal 1996 -- officials who oversee work-study programs see problems in placing too many restrictions on the funds.

John R. Heneisen, dean of student work at Berry College, says some colleges already are struggling with an existing requirement that 5 per cent of an institution's work-study students engage in community service. That's a particular problem, he says, in isolated areas where few community-service programs exist, and in areas that have many colleges and few outlets for community service.

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Battle Illiteracy continued...

Dr. Heneisen says some of his peers fear that the government may require that a proportion of new work-study positions be set aside for tutors in the literacy program.

President Clinton said in his radio address last month that he would like a "large portion of work study to be devoted to community service, and especially to teaching our children to read" -- a signal to some college officials that a mandate may be forthcoming.

But at an Education Department hearing last month on the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, David A. Longanecker, Assistant Secretary for postsecondary education, said the department viewed America Reads as "a challenge, not a mandate." He added: "We don't want institutions to suffer."

Administrators of work-study programs also say many of their students may not be qualified to tutor children to read. Training programs may be needed, they say.

In addition to Montana, the colleges that were signed up for America Reads by their presidents are Bank Street College of Education; Community College of Denver; Chicago State, Georgetown, New York, Ohio State, Pennsylvania State, Portland State, San Francisco State, and Southern Illinois Universities; Gettysburg, Miami-Dade Community, and Morehouse Colleges; the Universities of Maryland at College Park, Mississippi, North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Texas at El Paso; the California State University System, and the Vermont State Colleges.

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