

Familiar Things and Events—

'Dick and Jane' Out, 'Alaskan Reader' In

By SUSAN TAYLOR
Staff Writer

After many years of reading from the Dick and Jane series designed for the urban middle class child in the lower 48, the native now has his own series—the Alaskan Reader.

Currently in 51 schools, the books use words and experiences with which Alaskan children are familiar.

With the Dick and Jane series, the children were struggling with the intricacies of decoding in order to read words for which they had no concept, according to Virginia Jones of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, author of the books.

They had never seen a dog-like Spot that never worked or strange animals called cows, or funny-looking birds known as chickens.

And they had difficulty understanding why father worked in a city and did not go hunting and bring home food for the family. The multi-land freeways, the large modern supermarkets and department stores—all of these were unfamiliar concepts to a small child living in rural Alaska.

The children were being taught in the first grade to read about a way of life foreign to their background, said Mrs. Winifred B. Lande curriculum director of the Alaska Rural School Project at the University of Alaska. The Rural School Project has been assisting the Northwest Region in writing the books.

Teachers want the child to know about different cultures but do not want to lose the concept they are trying to get across in the meantime.

Rather, build the vocabulary and word skills around what the child knows and then go to the unknown, Mrs. Lande suggested.

For instance, she continued, first read about a one-room school house and finally about one with many rooms.

In this way, the child sees pictures of familiarities and comes to feel that the books are his.

Thus, she added, he achieves a sense of security and belonging during the early years of learning—the most important time in terms of successful reading.

Written in 12 consecutive levels, the books do not vary for the different regions of Alaska, but rather are based on experiences that all native children understand, Mrs. Lande explained.

This approach gives the child not only the sense of identity that he needs, but also encourages the feeling that he is not a member of this or that village, but an Alaskan.

The goal of the program, she continued, is to retain the best of the native culture and also help the child successfully compete in the majority culture.

Parents want their children to be prepared to get good jobs, she added.

So, while the child starts out reading about life in an Alaskan village, he winds up the 12th level by reading a commercial reader from the outside.

In between, the concepts that will prepare him to read the outside text are introduced.

For instance, at level six, a Caucasian child and his father land in the village.

Then, at level seven, the child visits "the big city of Fairbanks" where he goes into the supermarket, rides the escalator, and in other ways, is introduced to the outside world.

The 12 levels carry the child through the third grade such that by the time he "graduates" from the reader program, he should be ready for any basic text, Mrs. Lande said.

He should have learned all the skills introduced in the Dick and Jane series, but without Dick and Jane.

At the present time, none of the children using the Alaskan Reader have completed the three year program which was first introduced in 17 native villages in the fall of 1968.

And, according to Mrs. Lande, any significant results from the program will probably not appear until the students reach the fifth or sixth grade, the time when most native children fall behind.

Now in 51 schools, the program is scheduled to reach additional villages next year.

Eventually the effort may expand, Mrs. Lande said, to include supplemental materials for junior and senior high school students on native history and culture.

According to Virginia Jones, the Alaskan Reader program will be discussed at a symposium to be held Wednesday, March 4 at the annual convention of the American Educational Research Association in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

This presentation will be made by several staff members of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in Portland, Oregon including Virginia Jones.