

# There Are No Bottom of the Barrel Kids

*By Oma Riggs, P.S 155 M.*

With a class of 53 first grade children in P.S 155 in Spanish Harlem. I set out to disprove the two-much believed and worn-out myth that ‘these children’ cannot be taught to read.

My class was referred to as “the bottom of the barrel.” They were also called the “off-the-street” class because there were only six children enrolled the first morning and thirty-five by 2 p.m. that day.

Of the original six, all had been to kindergarten or Headstart, or both. Two had been in first grade the year before. About one-half of them spoke no English. (One student had been in Headstart twice and kindergarten one year. He could not speak a coherent sentence in either Spanish or English. He was later tested for Classes for the Retarded Mentally Developed and was to be put in a C.R.MD class. His mother and I both objected so strongly that he was never taken out of my class.)

They were given the New York State Reading Readiness test the first week in September. Their scores showed two children average, three slightly below average, ten very much below average, and the rest (11) were the lowest on the scale.

In the beginning, I sat a bilingual child with a non-English one. I told the bilingual child he was to explain everything in Spanish. As soon as the non-English child learned a few words. I rearranged them and would no longer let the bilingual child explain in Spanish.

When I did this, I explained to the children that I would love to have them speak Spanish, as I was trying to learn Spanish, but that their parents were sending them to school so I could teach them to speak, write, and read English. I also explained that they were not to speak to each other in Spanish since they all knew Spanish and didn’t need any help with that.

Since there was no English spoken in many of the homes, I explained that the only time they could practice English was in the classroom. Of course, many times, I needed a translator and used one of my children. I also learned “my Spanish” from them. (I am sure they think I’m very slow since my Spanish progression was not nearly as fast as their English!)

After my first day’s attempt at making circles, I sent out homework with directions in both English and Spanish, asking the parents to help. To make circles we begin at two on the clock, go up and all the way around the clock face and back to two again. It must be done this way to correct and prevent reversals. It also must be done this way because this kind of manuscript can with a few added lines, be made into connected or cursive writing very easily. I taught this direct, logical, simple method of unified phonics exactly as described by Romalda Spalding in her book, *Writing Road to Reading*. (Wm. Morrow & Co., New York)

After they learned to make circles and straight lines, I showed them how to form the letters. At this same time they were shown a card with its printed shape. They then wrote the letter as they repeated the sound, thus using all their senses to help the learning process. Many of them wrote upside down or backwards or both in the beginning. When enough letters and sounds had been learned, they began writing words in a spelling list, at the same time learning simple, logical rules of the language. They spelled each word by sounding it out as they wrote it. **They did not memorize a basic vocabulary. They did not copy from the board!**

Every word in the spelling notebooks was used correctly in both oral and written sentences. Homework meant writing sentences using words in the spelling list; sentences they could bring back to read to the class. In the beginning it was difficult to make the parents understand that their children must write their own sentences and only what they could read.

The parents were so anxious to help them that they did the writing for the children. Some of their first sentences were: "I am me." "See me." "It is me." "I can do it." Soon the children were making their own words by sounding them out. Some of them came in with 15 and 20 sentences a day.

After they had learned to write sentences well, they began writing them about themselves. Every child wrote and illustrated his own book, entitled ME. (Regular books were not introduced until they had a large enough basic vocabulary so they could read any good literature on their own level. Some brought in books that they read aloud to the class.)

They would come into school in the mornings and tell me things that had happened to them. Each time I would say, "You can write that in a story for me!" Their stories were written on yellow sheets of paper. They and I together found the mistakes and they corrected them. Then they copied them on white paper. As soon as the white sheet "passed inspection" – both theirs and mine – they were ready to draw a picture about their stories. This was also done on a 'first' sheet of paper. After I looked at it, they then put it on a white sheet and painted it with watercolors. Each child had his own set of watercolors and loved to paint.

One little Negro girl did exceptional artwork, but all of her faces were white. I said, "Your pictures are beautiful but why do you leave this pale look when you have such beautiful brown skin?" She beamed at me and from then on she made herself and her whole family a "beautiful brown" as did all the others.

In their June Open Book tests, their reading levels ranged from third grade to pre-primer except for the C.R.M.D child. Even this child's speech has improved greatly and he can write very well. They all speak English very well now, also.

The following story was written by a boy who scored the lowest on the N.Y State Readiness Test. He wrote upside down and backward in September.

My brother likes me sometimes. My brother is sixteen years old. He plays with me. I love my brother. I buy him candy. He hits me and I hit him back. He likes to play ball. He loves my father and I love him, too. My brother runs fast. When my brother went to Long Beach he did not have anywhere to sleep. He called my mother a hundred times. My mother told him to get a cab. So he came home in a cab. My mother had to pay the cab driver twenty-five dollars. My mother was sick. My father put him to bed. [Ed. See the before-and-after handwriting of this boy at the end of this article.]

As long as the "required" teacher education courses have no content and as long as the Board of Education insists 'all children learn to read differently and must be taught by different approaches,' our children will not learn to read. Our teachers, also will not be able to teach them.

"Readiness" does not mean what the New York State test implies.... It means that the parent brings the child to school, he is ready and eager to learn.

"Attention-Span" is as long as you, the teacher, want it to be

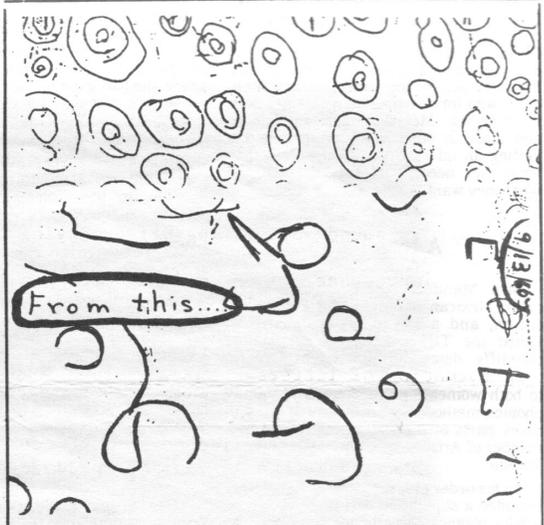
A “Disruptive-Child” does not exist until someone lets him be one. A teacher, exactly like a parent, must let the child know there are some things he cannot do in the school. This must be done with firmness and love. The child must be made to feel that only his undesirable habits are being rejected and not the child himself. This needs to be done with the knowledge, consent and cooperation of the parents at the first sign of any “behavioral” problem.

The teacher must not have the mistaken idea that they must “protect” the “ghetto” child from his own parents. Or that he must “feel sorry” for these children. “Under-privileged” does not mean all the thing we have been parroting. If we speak of worldly good, perhaps, but only perhaps. If we speak of love, care, and happiness and our other God-given attributes, I don’t believe we can look down and say “under-privileged.”

We must react to these children as to other human beings and treat them as we would treat our own children. I always teach a child as though he had an I.Q. of at least 120. I like to say things like: “My, you are smart!” “You are too smart today!” “I am proud of you!” “You are the best behaved class in the school!” “I don’t know anyone who is stupid!” “Oh, you are beautiful when you are thinking!”

These children must have pride in themselves and their work, as do all children. They can only have these if we, the teachers, make them know they are important to us as individuals, and demand work from them. We should make the same demands that we would make of any child of the same age any place else, and we will get exactly what we expect. If we expect a great deal, that is exactly what we will get. And if we expect nothing, we will get that, also.

This article appeared in the December 20, 1967, issue of *United Teacher*. It was republished in the Riggs Institute’s *Education Digest: Special Edition*. There is no date, but Myrna McCulloch sent it to me in 1998.



The before-and-after handwriting is that of Gerald Tenga, who scored the lowest on the New York State Reading Readiness Test in a first grade class in Spanish Harlem. In September of 1966, he wrote everything upside down and backward, as is seen by his handwriting above. He was not taken from the regular classroom for any outside remedial help. The class was taught by Oma Riggs using Romalda Bishop Spalding's The Writing Road to Reading, Wm. Morrow & Co., New York, N.Y., 1957.

This work was featured in a story by Fred Hechinger of The New York Times Service and reprinted in the Omaha World Herald, Omaha, Nebraska, April 8, 1979. No source was credited in Mr. Hechinger's article, though he was acquainted with Miss Riggs and her work in 1966. The Riggs Institute is seeking the whereabouts of Mr. Gerald Tenga, formerly of New York City, who was born around 1960.

to this in one year

My Brother.....

My brother likes me some times.  
 My brother is six years old. He plays with me. I love my brother. I buy him candy. He hits me and I hit him back. He likes to play ball. He loves my father and I love him, too. My brother runs fast. My brother loves my mother. When my brother went to Long Beach he did not have any where to sleep. He called my mother a hundred times. My mother told him to get a cab. So he came home in a cab. My mother had to pay the cab driver twenty-eight dollars. My mother was sick. My father put him to bed.

June 1, 1967

## **Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter**

[www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net)

January 15, 2017

Everything that Oma Riggs wrote in this wonderful article rings true in my experience, based on my 15 years as a bilingual teacher. The first year I taught a second grade bilingual class. The principal sent me a note asking for a list of my at-risk kids in my class. I returned the note without writing any names, explaining that I didn't have any at-risk kids in my classroom. She came down to my room and explained to me that all my kids were at-risk by mere virtue of the fact that they spoke Spanish. I replied that I figured the non-Spanish speakers were more at risk because they only knew one language.

I learned right then and there that my perspective on Spanish speaking students and the State of Texas were a bit at odds. My experience has been that most Spanish speaking bilingual students can perform almost as well as their English-speaking peers at the end of a school year - if the English instruction is of the highest order. Unlike Oma Riggs, I am bilingual. So I taught the content areas in both languages, but I did not slight the English.

You can learn more about the reading program Oma Riggs taught from two website:

<http://www.riggsinst.org>

<http://www.spalding.org>

The late Dr. Sylvia Farnham-Diggory was Director of the *Reading Study Center*, University of Delaware. She explained the psychology behind the Spalding method at a *Reading Reform Conference* in 1987. I republished her article in 2008. She passed away in 2006.

[http://donpotter.net/pdf/farhman-diggory\\_wrtr.pdf](http://donpotter.net/pdf/farhman-diggory_wrtr.pdf)

## THE RIGHT ROAD TO READING

A child can quickly read and write  
And accurately spell  
Through the proper use of sound and sight  
And tactile sense as well.

From left to right he has to go  
With hand, tongue, eye and ear,  
When he has oriented so  
Reversals will disappear.

The Spalding method, built around  
The functioning of the brain,  
Is neurologically sound  
And rational and sane.

So children taught the Spalding way  
Progress by leaps and bounds  
With simple phonograms which say  
How every letter sounds.

They tackle phonics eagerly  
From kindergarten age  
And soon pronounce each word they see  
Upon the printed page.

We start with the familiar kind  
The child already speaks  
And do not clutter up his mind  
With comic book techniques.

The six-year-olds appreciate  
This logical approach  
And never at a later date  
Will need a special coach.

By Dudley Clapp, 1962  
(Walter T. Spalding's M.I.T. Classmate)

The poem above was taken from *The Educational Digest: Special Edition* by the Riggs Institute, Beaverton, Oregon. No Date. The poem was added to this document on September 16, 2018.

## Spreading the Spalding Message:

# From NY to AZ, the USA Canada, Australia and back to Oregon

By Oma Riggs

When I began teaching in New York City, in 1959. I became increasingly dissatisfied because every year some children in my classes were failure in reading, and thus, in all other subjects. The students were all Black or of Spanish extraction, and the method I was using was the popular “Dick and Jane” look-say approach. From my observations, the children who were failing, in some instances, had superior intelligence. Unlike most teachers I new, I rejected the possibility of either student or teacher failure, and decided it could only be “the method.”

I began looking for an effective phonetic method at a time when phonics was being rejected by all the “experts” nationwide, especially at the teacher training level. The only intensive phonics program I was able to find in the city was Spalding’s *Writing Road to Reading*, which I studied and began to teach immediately. I was astonished with the results. It worked so beautifully with my remedial and fourth grade boys in midtown Manhattan that they were all about to return to the regular classrooms the following year. These students had previously been diagnosed as “learning disabled,” “emotionally disturbed,” etc.

This successful teaching experience led me to further involvement with others who were trying to restore a phonetic approach to teaching reading. I was asked by the late Watson Washburn, President of the Reading Reform Foundation, to serve as the New York City co-chairman with Dr. Donald Barr, Headmaster of Dalton schools, Inc. That summer, I met Romalda Spalding at the R.R.F annual conference and took her course.

From my work during the following two years at junior high in Brooklyn’s Red Hook area, I concluded that this method was extremely effective if the teacher is properly trained. I also became convinced that the teaching of the English language becomes almost as precise science when taught simultaneously through the four learning avenues to the mind.

### Personal Proof

As I was able to perfect and align my teaching deliver to Mrs. Spalding’s manual, I began to fully appreciate Dr. Samuel Orton’s theories of learning upon which she had built her program. Additional “personal proof” came through my work with five seventh grade non-English boys who spoke four different languages. The new arrivals, from Brazil, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Chile, and Puerto Rico, were given six months of group tutoring, six hours per week. The following year, three were placed in the top eight-grade class with two in the second highest class. All were able to speak, read, write, spell, understand and enjoy the English language.

Concerned parents and civic leaders began to ask me to train teachers for them. I also began teaching the Spading method as a in service course for the New York City Board of Education and for summer courses at numerous colleges and universities in New York state. Employed as a Master Teacher for Teacher’s Inc., New York City, and the University of Massachusetts. I trained graduate students in intensive phonics, remedial reading and classroom management in Chinatown, New York City. I spent time teaching “upward bound” high school minority students at Sara Lawrence College, Bronxville, New York, as well as training early childhood and middle school teachers at Dalton Schools Inc. I trained

teenagers to become tutors for elementary age children in a summer O.E.C program and while supervising the program's successful operation, the tutors and I both took Mrs. Spalding's training courses; I, for the second time. Simultaneously, I was employed full time as a classroom teacher at various grade levels in New York City and in 1966 began teaching first grade in Spanish Harlem.

By this time, from my own experience and hearing of the success enjoyed by the teachers I had trained, I had proven my various beliefs "hat we should be teaching this method in the beginning grades to prevent reading failure. (See previous article, "There Are No Bottom-Of-The-Barrel Kids.") During all this time, I had not found one child that I could not teach to read, write and spell.

### Traveling the Country

In 1972, by invitation of Mrs. Raymond Rubicam, at that time chairman of the National Reading Reform Foundation, I flew to Arizona to conduct an all-day workshop. Enrollees numbered approximately 200 teachers from throughout the state. By popular demand for the Spalding method, I returned in October to conduct two-week workshop. Later, I returned at the request of the Southwest Indiana School. Some of their teachers and volunteer aides had previously taken the course and were having great success teaching Indiana children. The request for the Spalding method in Arizona became so numerous that I decided to take a leave of absence without pay. After spending that year teaching in Arizona, with both undergraduate and graduate credit being given by Northern Arizona University. I decided to take an early retirement from the New York City Public schools in order to meet the demand for more courses, more follow-up and more in-service requests.

I have been traveling the United States, Canada, and Australia since 1974 as a "fulltime, freelance" teacher trainer and consultant teaching in both public colleges and universities. Colleges in California, Vermont, South Dakota, Nebraska, Montana, Louisiana, Arizona, New York, Oregon, and other have accredited the course on their campuses, as well as often providing credited for staff training, in-service and workshops held off campus. Spalding is always recommended by the New York State Department of Education.

The need for better organization and unification effort and the absolute necessity of training more college instructors, has convicted me of the need for a national teacher training center. It is vital if we are ever to reverse the current trend of declining teacher competency and moral and the resultant illiteracy in the United States.

Everywhere I conduct training sessions, I encounter great enthusiasm on the part of classroom teachers, parents and business community. I am convinced that unless our children once again begin to succeed, we will be faced with continued reading failures and widespread illiteracy, which leads to nonproductive divisiveness in our communicates, tax revolts, etc. We simply cannot afford to continue to admit to the world that we are incapable of teaching our own language to our own children.

Note from Donald Potter on 9/17/ 2018: This article is from the same undated publication as the lead article. It was written sometime after 1978. The late Myrna McCulloch sent it to me in the late 1990's. I plan to add a few more articles later.

[www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net)

[www.blendphonics.org](http://www.blendphonics.org)

<http://www.spalding.org>

<http://www.riggsinst.org>