

**Twenty IFs - The Yearly History of a Change in Plans  
1972-1973 - The Reading Program - Learning Tree - and Seven IFs**

**The Year of Seven IFs**

When Mary and I began our third year of teaching at Mayfair, the following five changes had taken place:

1. Jerry had been replaced as principal of Mayfair by Alex Salazar. Over the summer, the predominantly Latino community that the Alum Rock School District served had expressed extreme frustration that none of the twenty-four schools in the district had a Latino administrator.

To quell the mounting anger, Jerry had been moved to the district office and Alex was now the single (token) Latino principal in the district. Alex's made no secret of the fact that his future ambition was to be Superintendent of Schools in Del Rio, Texas, where bilingual education was in vogue.

2. A few months after the fire, Mayfair had received funding for a Learning Disabled (LD) teaching position to start in the Fall. EH classes placed selected students in a classroom setting for the entire day. LD teachers taught the same kind of students, but on a pullout basis one hour a day, five days a week. For the remainder of the school day, the students remained in their regular classrooms. Since I had already taught EH in East Palo Alto, I applied for and was accepted as Mayfair's LD teacher.

3. The year before, Alum Rock School District had begun a Federally funded \$12,000,000.00 voucher experiment. The staffs at schools participating in the experiment were required to divide themselves into autonomous mini-schools. The mini-schools were then free to create their own curriculum and advertise it to the parents of their own school and the other schools participating in the experiment. Participating parents then received a voucher for the cost of their child's education and gave it to the mini-school of their choice. Mini-schools were to succeed or fail based on each mini-school's ability to attract students and their accompanying vouchers.

This year, Mayfair and four other schools would undergo training in preparation for being added next year to the five schools who were now participating in the experiment.

4. Mary and I were no longer viewed with scorn by the majority of the faculty. The CIME workshop experience had changed how most of our fellow teachers viewed us and our different ways of teaching. My LD position came with funding for teaching materials. I used all my LD



Had Diane visited me, her focus would most likely have become the fire and how my class had so nicely recovered from it. The pre and post-test results had already been widely distributed by the time of her visit and my class had scored its 5.7 test average that Spring, even though all the materials they had been learning with previously had turned to ashes in the fire. The article's focus on *Workjobs* was much more to my liking.

### **The Reading Program - Lets Do It**

I was now the LD teacher which meant I would be working with thirteen children from eight different classrooms in second through fifth grades. Five groups of two and one group of three. Each LD child was being sent to me specifically because he or she was having difficulty in learning to read. That meant I would be teaching reading all day long every day. It would be my experience in teaching these thirteen children that would form the core of Mary's and my Reading Program.

At the same time, Mary would be teaching the steadily evolving program to her first graders. She would also be sharing hers and my teaching materials with all four kindergarten teachers and one other first grade teacher. Six classes and six LD groups all using the Reading Program.

But saying "Lets do it" is not the same as doing it. Mary and I had just bought a new home. We had barely qualified for the mortgage and our financial resources were limited. To create a program from scratch would require money we did not have.

We needed to hire someone to work in Mary's classroom to turn our ideas into usable materials for the six classrooms and my LD room. This person could NOT be a paid school employee like Mary's classroom aide, because if we used school personnel to make the materials, the school could later claim that a program produced with district people on district time was owned by the district.

So, I turned to my three brothers for financial support. Their money was used throughout the 1972-1973 school year to fund the program's development and in July and August of 1973 for preparing eight classroom kits to be used in the eight classrooms of the Learning Tree Mini-school that was created by Mary and me as part of Mayfair's inclusion in the voucher experiment.

At the beginning of the school year both Mary and I were using the 42 Open Court sound-pictures to create words for our students to read. The philosophy we were using at this starting point was based on the book *Teacher* by Sylvia Ashton-Warner, published in 1963. This book had spawned an approach to teaching reading called "Whole Language".

Based on the Whole Language approach, once we had taught our students all 42 sound-pictures, Mary and I would ask our students to give us a word or words they liked, such as squirrel, or hippopotamus, or fire engine. We would then take each student's word and create it for him or her using copies of the sound-pictures. The child would then be shown the words he or she had asked for and, if the child could read the word, it would remain in that child's ever-growing stack of words. A word that could not be read would be discarded. The only way to keep it was to read it.

The phrase "Whole Language" came from the method Ashton-Warner had used to teach Maori children in New Zealand who were not learning to read using traditional methods. Ashton-Warner wrote out words that were important to the children she was teaching. These words were placed in each child's individual word-stack and remained there only if the child could read them. These words became prized possessions for her students and, in Ashton-Warner words, "Reading became a great joy." This Whole Language approach was now rivaling the teaching of phonics in classrooms across our country.

Mary's combining Ashton-Warner's Whole Language approach with the use of sound-pictures instead of letters was an instant success. Because Mary had the special aide we had hired in her classroom, she could create picture-words, not just for her students, but for the other classrooms using the program, as well.

Parents loved the program. One parent was particularly impressed by the fact that her first grade son was reading better than his older sister. This parent was taking an education class at San Jose State University and expressed her excitement about the Reading Program her son was using to her professor. Her professor dismissed her enthusiasm by saying "Why the extra step?" She got it. He didn't.

### **What I Learned from Sam**

While Mary and the other classes were having great success, I was not. My second through fifth grade LD students were not benefitting from this modified Whole Language approach. They could not retain all 42 sounds, so reading words like squirrel or hippopotamus was not possible. In addition, even if I helped them with all the sounds in a word, they still had trouble remembering all the sounds I had just told them. Or, if they did remember, they could not blend so many sounds into words.

If I were still a fifth grade teacher, I would not have been in as good a position to analyze the various problems my students were having and come up with solutions. However, as an LD teacher, I had the

opportunity six times each day to think about what was going wrong for my thirteen students and how to make it go right. In the training video I made for teachers using the Reading Program that is viewable on the Center's website, I talk about a student named Sam. He's not a made-up character. He was Samuel Dillwood, one of my LD fifth graders.

Mary, and the other teachers now using the program with her, introduced all the sounds at the beginning. They also used any words that popped into their students' heads. Sam could not even come close to learning all the sounds. And, even if I told him every sound in the word he had requested, if the word had more than three sounds in it, Sam could not remember the few sounds he had just been told.

When I became an EH teacher in East Palo Alto, my purpose was to find ways to teach my students that would allow them to learn along with every other child in a regular classroom. My goal remained the same. To meet that goal of teaching every child, I had to find ways to change the Reading Program so that Sam could learn to read as easily as the children in Mary's class.

Sam is directly responsible for nearly every change I made to the program to accommodate children like him. For Sam, we would have to introduce very few sounds at the start. We would also have to start with much smaller words. Two-sound words would be ideal, followed by three-sound words and then short phrase made up initially of only two and three-sound words. But, how to do it?

If we were to start with only a few sounds, which sounds should the children learn first? To decide which sounds should be learned first Mary and I analyzed the sounds in the Dolch Words. The Dolch Words are the most frequently used words in the English language. We used these words as a starting point for deciding the order I would introduce the sounds to Sam.

Once we knew the order of the sounds, we had to figure out what two and three-sound words could be made as Sam was introduced to each new sound. Because I was more familiar with ITA, I decided that we should abandon Open Court's 42 sounds and use ITA's 44 sounds as the basis of our work instead. I did not think much of the ITA alphabet, but I had more faith in the 44 sounds of ITA than the 42 of Open Court.

Its handy to have a brother who is a computer expert. Mary and I gave my older brother Paul a list of the 44 sounds (in the form of made-up spellings for them) and had Paul create a program that listed all possible combinations of the sounds as each new sound was introduced. Paul

made a computer printout for us to use for all possible two and then three-sound words for all combinations of sounds from two to forty-four.

Example:

For 1 sound, there are no two-sound words possible.

For 2 sounds, Sounds 1-2 & 2-1 are possible words.

For 3 sounds, 1-2 & 1-3 & 2-1 & 2-3 & 3-1 & 3-2 are possible words.

For 4 sounds, 1-2 & 1-3 & 1,4 & 2-1 & 2-3 & 2-4 & 3-1 & 3-2 & 3-4 & 4-1 & 4-2 & 4-3

And so on, all the way to 44.

Not all the sound combinations produce words and not all the words produced were useable. Even so, Paul's computer printout is what we used to create the two and three-sound words that would allow Sam to become a reader.

Using pictures to represent the sounds of English dated back to at least 1948 when Ideal Toy Company had done something quite similar to what Open Court was now doing. What was unique in our program was not the use of pictures to represent sounds, but the use of sound-pictures to represent the words themselves.

### **Dekodiphukan**

Since we abandoned Open Court, we also abandoned its sound-pictures. Mary and I then began creating a list of pictures for the sounds that we could use to replace the Open Court pictures. We knew the order of the sounds. The challenge, though, was not teaching the order of the sounds. The challenge was to find a way to link the sound to a picture so anyone seeing the picture would know its sound.

The correct pronunciation of almost all sounds can best be heard at the end of a word. For example, the "T" sound can be heard clearly at the end of the work nut. If one tries to hear it at the beginning of a word, like tree, it is frequently misspoken as "tuh." Since most sounds are heard best at the end of words, I decided to write a story in rhyme that would introduce the pictures for all 44 sounds.

A longer version of this paragraph's story appears in the [Freshman English and Mr. Vasta](#) sub-section [College -Freshman Year – Away at School](#) section of [Chapter 2 – Twenty-Seven IFs in Life On My Path to Becoming a Teacher](#). When I was a Freshman in college, my English professor had instructed his class never to fall in love with a sentence. If a sentence did not fit in your story, get rid of it. I found that instruction a bit odd. I could not even imagine falling in love with a sentence. However, in one of the many essays I had to write for Freshman English, I did actually fall in love with a sentence. I could see it didn't quite fit in

the story I was writing, but I really could not bring myself to delete it. When my professor returned my paper to me, he circles that very sentence and wrote next to it, “This whole paragraph is tortured prose. You could easily make poetry out of it, but it is bad prose.” That paragraph was, in fact, poetry that I had written without knowing it.

Years later, when I was in the Navy and on the USS Midway steaming off the coast of Japan, I took a break from reading the books I had brought on the cruise with me to fill my non-working hours. As my reading break, I tried my hand at writing a short story. I noticed as I was writing, though, that many of the sentences I had written were a bit awkward. Even so, I still liked them. They reminded me of that one paragraph from Freshman English and what my professor had said about it. When I had reexamined that paragraph in response to the professor’s suggestion, I had found that it was poetry. My professor’s comment from then prompted me to take a second look at the sentences I was writing now.

When I began breaking the sentences apart, I could see that I had actually been writing my short story as poetry all along and had not even noticed. It was already in meter and already in rhyme. I turned that short story into a bit of poetry I called alternately “Soft Salt Tear” or “Non But I” depending on my mood. I have included a copy of that poem at the end of this section. So, when I say I decided to write a story in rhyme to introduce all 44 sounds, I had already learned that writing poems or stories in rhyme was something that came naturally to me.

While Mary and I were at Lake Tahoe skiing over Christmas vacation, I took a day off from the slopes and wrote *Dekodiphukan* (a name I made up that day). I made up a rhyming story to fit the order we had decided on for the sound-pictures. For the few sounds for which we had not yet thought of pictures, I made up what the pictures should be as I reached that sound’s order in the sound-sequence Mary and I had decided on.

### **Artist On Loan**

Mary had given a workshop for a company in Palo Alto called Creative Publications. *Workjobs* had now been published and was getting rave reviews. Dale Seymour, the president of the company, was a big fan of Mary’s and said he wished his company had published Mary’s book. He wanted to know what Mary might be doing next and she described the Reading Program to him. He then offered to lend us his company’s residence artist for the project.

After I wrote *Dekodiphukan*, we contacted Creative Publications and took Dale up on his offer. Bob Larson, their artist, then became our artist on-

loan. We were now free of any need to use the Open Court sound-pictures. In January of 1973, the creation of the Baratta-Lorton Reading Program began in earnest.

### **The Voucher Experiment**

In that same January, the staff of Mayfair School began preparation for being added to Alum Rock's voucher experiment. We attended after-school meetings with the district personnel in charge of implementing the experiment. We needed to learn the rules for dividing ourselves into mini-schools and then preparing for the possibility of our new schools surviving or failing based on solely on parental selections.

We were also attended sessions with counselors assigned to guide us through the process of forming into mini-schools. The creation of an as yet unknown number of mini-schools by the Mayfair staff meant we would, on our own, have to decide what our school would teach, who would join with us as the staff for our new school, and how we would promote our new mini-school to the parents of our school and the nine other schools that would now be in the experiment.

The prospect of forming mini-schools created several underlying concerns. The most significant one was, what would happen to teachers in a mini-school that did not end up with enough students? Our jobs were now dependent on our convincing parents to send us their children. If the parents did not send us their children, were we then out of work?

This concern was made more real because there was very little trust in Alex. One of the mini-schools was definitely going to be an Alex-led bilingual mini-school, even though principals were not supposed to participate in the operation of any mini-school or show any bias for one mini-school over another. The general consensus was that he would use a failure of any mini-school as an excuse to transfer teachers out and bring in teachers who were bilingual.

Because there was a very real concern about Alex, he was asked directly if he would promise not to transfer any Mayfair teachers who were part of the voucher experiment out of the school. He promised that he would not, but his level of credibility was so low, the staff collectively said "Will you put that in writing?" He agreed. We wrote out a statement of his promise. He signed it. We made copies and gave one to each teacher. With that concern now out of the way, the process of creating mini-schools began in earnest.

### **Learning Tree**

By the end of the process, the Mayfair teachers had divided themselves into five mini-schools. Mary and I named our school Learning Tree. We



were joined by six other teachers, five of whom had taken our CIME workshop and four of whom were already using the Reading Program in their classrooms. The Learning Tree teachers in addition to Mary and me were: Shelly Boutacoff (kindergarten), Karen Morelli (kindergarten), Lynn Pruzan (kindergarten), Maureen West (first), Richard Cossen (second), Cathy Swanson (fourth & fifth). They collectively appointed me as the Learning Tree spokesperson and de facto Principal.

Three of the four kindergarten classes at Mayfair were in our mini-school. The fourth kindergarten class was taught by Mike Garcia. He declared himself to be a one-teacher mini-school that he named Kindergarten-Plus. He, too, was using the Reading Program. So all the kindergartens and two of the four first grades were already using Learning Tree's Reading Program.

Alex had the only two bilingual teacher on the Mayfair staff for his Bilingual Mini-school. Monica Ortiz was a first and second grade teacher who was both a CIME participant and Mike Garcia's soon-to-be bride. She wanted very much to join us at Learning Tree, but she felt she owed it to her people to be with the Bilingual Mini-School for its first year. Without her participation, that school would only have a single teacher. Monica would join us at Learning Tree for year-two and beyond.

Alex was aware of how much students and parents in the kindergarten and first grade classes using our Reading Program loved it, so he asked me if his Bilingual Mini-school could have it to use, as well. I said that our Reading Program was what going to distinguished us from the other mini-schools. Without that distinction, there would be no reason for parents to choose Learning Tree. We would have our Reading Program and he would have his bilingual education.

Learning Tree, Bilingual Mini-School and Kindergarten-Plus, were staffed by eleven of Mayfair's twenty-four teachers. The other thirteen teachers formed themselves into a group of nine and a group of four. I do not remember the names they gave their two mini-schools. The curriculum each group offered was simply the standard approach to teaching, with nothing new added. A tough sell in a Voucher School environment.

Mayfair's five mini-schools along with all the other mini-schools were advertised in a brochure sent to every parent of every child in the ten schools now participating in the experiment. The inherent flaw in this manner of selection was that parents only received a written description of the offerings with no oral presentations and no way to ask questions of the mini-school representatives. This meant that parents would most likely make their mini-school choices based upon what they knew of the teachers at their own school.

### **The Parents Made Their Selections**

With parental choices made, two of Mayfair's five mini-schools (40% of the staff) ended up with 70% of the students. These two schools were Learning Tree and Alex's Bilingual Mini-School. Learning Tree had eight teachers and, coincidentally, enough enrollments for eight very full classrooms. Bilingual also had enough enrollments for eight classrooms, but only two teachers. Mike Garcia's Kindergarten-Plus had a full class of students (5% of the staff and 5% of the students). However, neither of the two mini-schools whose names I cannot remember had the numbers they needed to employ all of their teachers. 55% of the teachers had only 25% of the students.

Alex's mini-school had a problem. Many of the Bilingual Mini-School enrollments had not come from parents in the Mayfair community. They were parents from elsewhere in the district who saw "bilingual" in the voucher brochure and liked that option. These parents were not yet aware that all the Bilingual Mini-School had was a name. The Mini-School had only two teachers, no actual bilingual curriculum, and would still need to hire six more teachers. Since Alex had promised not to transfer anyone, these teachers would have to be drawn from the staff at Mayfair whose mini-schools did not have enough students. None of those teacher spoke more than rudimentary Spanish. This was a disaster just waiting to happen.

All of the Learning Tree enrollments had come from the Mayfair community. As I indicated earlier, parents were most likely to base their choices on their knowledge of teachers at their own school. The parents and the children of all the kindergarten classes and the two first grade classes using it loved the Reading Program. All these parents signed up for Learning Tree to keep their children in the program.

In addition, all the parents sending their kindergarten children to Mayfair for the first time, learned from other parents in the Mayfair community that their children should sign up for either Learning Tree or Mike Garcia's Kindergarten Plus. The older brothers and sisters of the Reading Program families were now also enrolled in Learning Tree.

### **The Steam Roller**

The nickname given Learning Tree by the teachers in the under-enrolled mini-schools was "the steam roller." This was because we had all the kindergarten and first grade students in the Mayfair community in our school for this first year. The next year, our kindergarten and first grade students would stay with us as they became first and second graders, while all the new kindergarten students would come to us, as well. Year three would see us with all the students from kindergarten through grade three. Each year Learning Tree would monopolize a new grade

level. In effect, we would “steam roll” the other mini-schools right out of existence. In the foreseeable future, Mayfair School might as well be renamed Learning Tree.

The steam roller analogy was not lost on Alex. He too could see the cumulative effect of our massive kindergarten and first grade enrollments as the years progressed. He also knew that his Bilingual Mini-School was in trouble. He had no particular curriculum and only two teachers who spoke fluent Spanish. He would now have to fill his staff with the left-over teachers from the under performing mini-schools and find a way to give them all a quick emersion course in Spanish.

Once again Alex asked me if his mini-school could also use our Reading Program. His argument now was that Learning Tree’s enrollment was already set, so we no longer needed to have the program exclusively for ourselves. I said that this was just year-one of our participation in the voucher experiment. We would need the uniqueness of our Reading Program for each new year of the experiment. We would share it with everyone once the experiment was over.

### **My Dream Job**

From my standpoint, my dream job had now been created. The next school year, I would be returning to my fifth grade classroom, surrounded by teachers who actually liked Mary and me and who shared Mary’s and my philosophy of teaching. Alex had replaced Jerry, and now, for Learning Tree at least, I was replacing Alex. In addition, the national attention that would be part of a successful voucher experiment in Alum Rock would be the best possible way to share the Reading Program with the rest of the country.

Addison-Wesley was really pleased with the early success of *Workjobs* and was waiting for the next book Mary might deliver. Thanks to the article in Learning Magazine, *Workjobs* had sold 100,000 copies before Addison-Wesley even began advertising it, in a teacher market where selling just 15,000 books counts as a best seller. We had shown the Reading Program to an Addison-Wesley sale rep and he asked if we knew we were sitting on a gold mine?

As school ended, I met with Alex briefly in his office to talk about the coming year. I said the next school year would be interesting because we each now had our own schools. I ended our chat by saying, “Let’s see whose school does better.”

### **Seven IFs**

IF Diane Divoky had not written about Mary and *Workjobs*, instead of my class and its fire,

Then *Workjobs* would not have been the over night sensation Diane's *Learning Magazine* article made it. The success of *Workjobs* would play an unexpectedly major role in Mary's and my future.

IF there had not been a fire at Mayfair school,

Then the Reading Program might never have existed. My response to Mary's "What can I do to help you?" was, "Let's finally do the Reading Program we've been thinking about." The fire caused me to apply for the LD position at the school so that I could spend the year accumulating the teaching materials I had lost in the fire. That LD teaching position was vital to the development of the Reading Program.

IF my Freshman English Professor had not circled that sentence and,

IF I had not decided to write that short story on the Midway,

Then I would never have known I could write the *Dekodiphukan* book that is the source for the 44 sounds of the Reading Program.

*Dekodiphukan* is such an essential part of the Program that it is the name most teacher give to the Program.

IF Creative Publications had not loaned us its resident artist,

Then nothing about the Reading Program would be anything like it is today. All 44 sound-pictures and every one of the Program's illustrations are products of the active imagination of that one Creative Publications artist.

IF the Alum Rock School District had not received the \$12,000,000.00 grant for the Voucher Experiment and,

IF Mayfair School had not been added to the Voucher Experiment,

Then there never would have been a Learning Tree Mini-School and the eight kits made for Learning Tree's use would not have been made.

## Soft Salt Tear

My head I've Oh so quickly turned  
That none but I might see  
The soft salt tear of sadness there  
So newly loosed from me

So quickly do I dry my eyes  
When once my head is turned  
That near as any soul may come  
He'll know not what he's learned

When I'm alone all by myself  
My tears so freely flow  
But when, as now, I face the world  
I smile lest someone know

No body hurt has shown me thus  
My eyes so need to hide  
For what's quite worse leads me to  
weep  
Is what I've locked inside

The thoughts I long to give the world  
The love I wish to share  
Will stay locked up inside of me  
Till I find one who'll care

Is there in all of us, I ask,  
So much we keep inside  
Or is it only I who feels  
My thoughts were meant to hide?

Yes, tears are all that really show  
When more I'd wish to say  
For I've not found the one I seek  
The one for whom I pray

But, Oh, what's this? What's this I  
see?  
So far across the room?  
Why isn't that a tear I see?  
A messenger of gloom?

Her tear I hope is just like mine  
A mirror of her dreams  
Yet closer must I surely draw  
For nothing's as it seems

As I come near she turns her head  
Her face I cannot see  
Yet nearer still my search will go  
For what I wish must be

She's turned again to face the room  
No glimmer in her eye  
So near and yet so far away  
Yes, see, her eyes are dry

My search has found no ending yet  
No, never did she cry  
One only sees how gay she looks  
Yes, smiles never lie

**4 March 1964**