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By Shaila Dewan

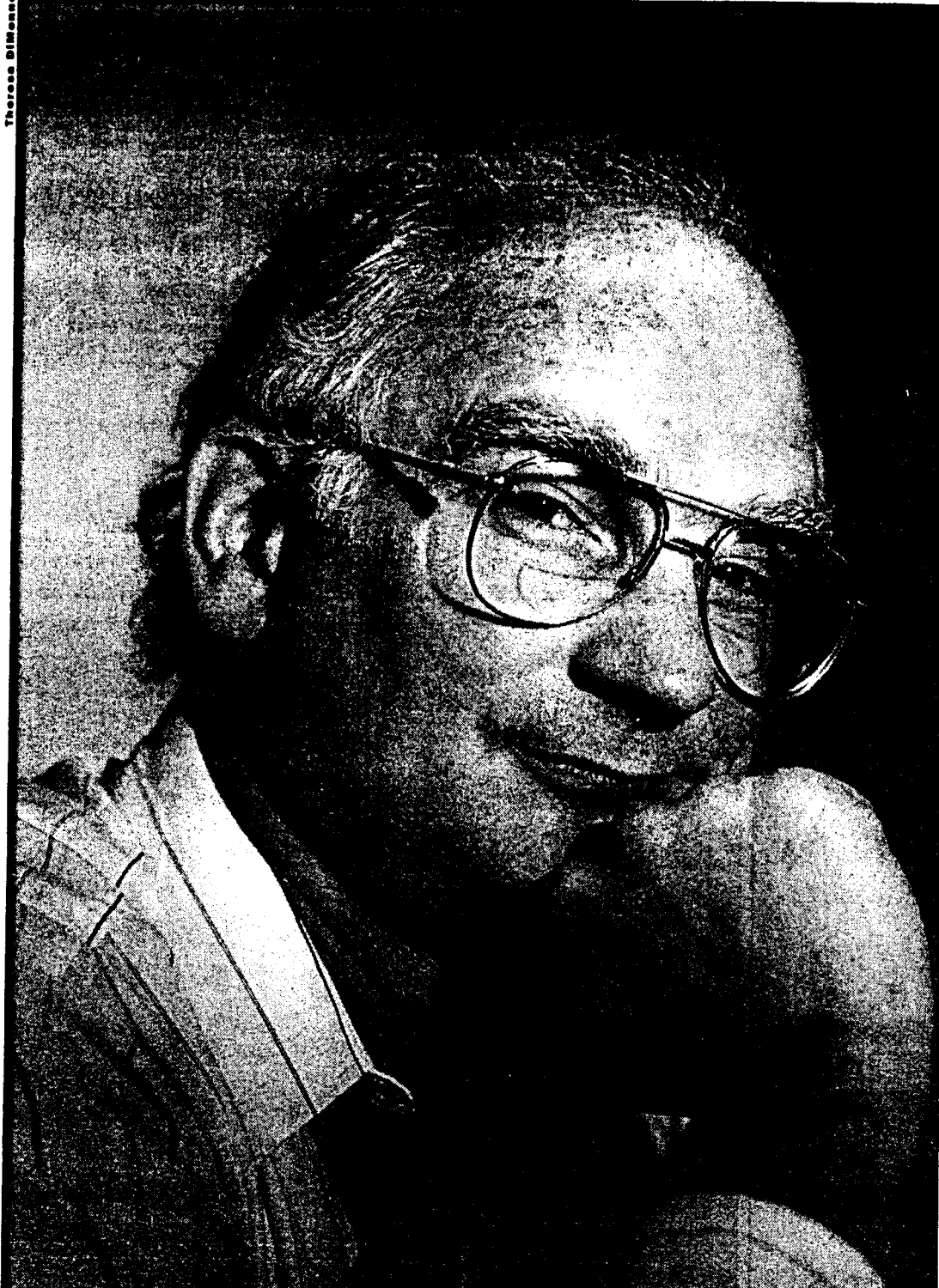
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Why Johnny Might Someday Be Able to Read

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Shaila Dewan, an investigative reporter for the *Houston Press*, wrote this article and won the 1988 Benjamin Fine Award for Outstanding Education Reporting (and a job with the *New York Times*).

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this week in News

Why Johnny Might Someday Be Able to Read

When Eldo Bergman confronted his son's reading problems, he took the scientific approach. Now he is trying to convince schools to do the same.

BY SHAILA DEWAN

Pediatric neurologist Eldo Bergman is not a teacher, but he has a great deal to say about teaching reading. As a medical scientist, he sees patients every day who have severe reading disabilities. As the founder of the Texas Reading Institute, he's in the vanguard of reading instruction in the state. And as a committee member, he's helped draft a nationally recognized plan of action for the Houston Independent School District.

But Bergman has the most to say about reading when he speaks as the father of five children, two of whom are learning disabled. Even then, this white-haired, affable version of the Good Doctor takes a scientific approach. To illustrate his long struggle to find help for his son Philip, Bergman pulls out a favorite visual aid: a graph of Philip's reading level from second grade right on up to the present, at age 23. At the top of the graph is a line indicating the ability of the average reader. It slants gently and steadily upward, hovering a smidgen below grade level. Philip's lines, which track various skills involved in reading, are well below average. In second grade, he was about half a grade level behind. By the time he entered high school, he was reading at a fifth-grade level, and his ability to read new words was even lower -- though he'd received intensive specialized instruction from HISD for four years.

In eleventh grade, Philip, whose IQ exceeded 140, was among the 61 percent of HISD juniors who read more than two grades below grade level. By then, Bergman knew that most remedial help offered in schools today won't enable the weakest readers to catch up. Contrary to the oft-repeated adage that children will "grow out of" reading impairment, children who are poor readers in first grade have proven to be overwhelmingly likely to be poor readers in twelfth grade. And poor readers are not anomalies -- about 20 percent of the population has persistent reading trouble.

Bergman and a growing cadre of parents, activists and teachers insist that many of these children can not only be helped, they can be helped fairly

easily: With the phonemic technique Bergman advocates, even severely disabled children can be brought up to speed with 40 to 80 hours of one-on-one instruction; and the earlier the intervention, the less help they need. And so Bergman's graph represents not only his son's progress, but hope for one out of five children.

Once Philip was "out of the grasp" of public school, Bergman was free to work intensely with his son to overcome what he knew, by then, were Philip's specific hurdles. Three years after Philip graduated from high school, he was finally reading at an adult level.

While trying to help Philip, Bergman came to believe that no one in Houston administered the appropriate assessment tests for children like Philip and that no one used the most effective teaching programs. In response, he started the Texas Reading Institute, which in its eclectic approach essentially does what schools are supposed to do for learning disabled children -- it tailors each child's instruction to meet his or her specific needs. The parents who bring their children to the institute are those whose children do not respond to normal intervention. In other words, Bergman gets the toughest cases.

The stories these parents tell are remarkably similar; Bergman calls them "stories of quiet and not-so-quiet desperation." To begin with, the families grow more and more frustrated with their school district's programs and attitude. Often, they resort to employing a \$50-an-hour advocate to help them navigate the special education system. They discover that they must demand what they want for their children -- from tests for dyslexia to special training for teachers. They stop believing the words "your child is doing fine" or "your child is lazy and unmotivated," and start believing their children are being shunted through the system. They find that teachers assigned to help their children are often unprepared, untrained or just don't show up. Finally, another parent or their advocate refers them to TRI. Here, they pay \$200 to have their child tested, and \$40 an hour for one-on-one instruction.

These parents swear by Dr. Bergman. So far, his institute has tested approximately 200 students, and tutored approximately 75. Bergman happily offers statistics such as this one: The institute's first 30 students improved 3.4 grade levels in word attack (the ability to sound out an unfamiliar word) after four to eight weeks of instruction. With few exceptions, kids who cannot read before attending the institute can read afterward.

The key, Bergman says, is to look at the scientific research -- the solution to illiteracy is there in black and white. Ninety-six to 98 percent of the population, he says, can be taught to read. And learning to read can resonate positively throughout a child's life -- parents report improved self-esteem, fewer behavior problems, less hyperactivity and even better handling of speech impediments. Suzy Zrake, director of the Katy Attention Deficit Disorder Association, says two weeks after her daughter started sessions at

TRI, she got a call from her school. The assistant principal wanted to know if Zrake had changed her daughter's medication.

Despite an emphasis on reading on both the state and federal level, school districts are just beginning to respond to the research Bergman cites. In that sense, Bergman says, the education world is far different from the world of medical science. In his field, he says, a cure for cancer would be readily embraced -- in fact, he points out, if a drug is proven effective, sometimes a study will be halted in order to administer the drug to the control group. But in the education world, the "cure" for illiteracy is gaining acceptance painfully slowly. Governor George Bush's reading initiative may provide a broad stroke of support for literacy, but many of the concrete changes in local districts can be traced back to the grassroots agitation of Bergman and his ilk.

"If I had gone to the school district years ago and said, 'I'm really concerned about teenage pregnancy and we have this program,' there would be no problem," Bergman says. "You go to the schools and say, 'I'm really concerned about my son's reading,' there's nothing you can say that doesn't anger them. You're hitting at a real central, sensitive area there."

One reason change is such slow going is that researchers know far more about reading than do many educators. For decades, the so-called Reading Wars have centered on the debate over phonics-based versus whole-language instruction. Phonics teaches rule-based letter-sound correspondence; whole language seeks to instill in children a love of literature, on the theory that kids who love literature will "naturally" learn how to read and spell.

As political conservatives became standard bearers for phonics, the debate strayed from educational theory into politics: The Texas Observer recently called Governor Bush's embrace of phonics "the political equivalent of Christian witnessing" -- never mind whether it works. Though whole language still prevails in many schools, experts now say the debate is over. They point to California, which slid from educational excellence to dismal failure after implementing whole language instruction. In response, educators have paced out a no-man's-land they refer to as a "balanced approach," a blend of whole language and phonics.

The debate between whole language (or, in a previous incarnation, "whole word") and phonics disturbed Bergman when, in the mid-'80s, he began looking for help for his son. "From what I could see, this damn argument hadn't changed for 40 years. It's a bad question. There aren't any scientific questions that stay in that primitive a form for 40 years -- questions become more subtle, more sophisticated and deeper. I had this real visceral, sick-to-the-stomach feeling that the whole debate was irrelevant." As Bergman continued his research, he grew more and more dismayed at the lack of scientific data. "I couldn't see any documentation in the literature that

anybody could say, 'Here's a group of kids, here's what's wrong with them and here's what you do about it.' "

When he finally consulted reading experts at Harvard and Northwestern, they recommended he seek out a systematic phonics program for Philip. Phonics, Bergman says, was "the only show in town." But at the time, the Houston Independent School District did not have any approved phonics programs. So Bergman convinced Philip's school principal to have a teacher trained at Houston's Neuhaus Education Center, which specializes in a program called "Alphabetic Phonics." The teacher worked with Philip "off the record" for an hour every day, and Philip made nine months' progress during the school year. His Admission, Review and Dismissal committee, which helps determine the Individualized Educational Plan for each child who qualifies for special help, recommended that he continue phonics when he entered sixth grade the following year, so more teachers were trained. Today, Neuhaus has trained over 200 HISD teachers.

But Bergman realized that even with Alphabetic Phonics, his son would never catch up to grade level. Bergman continued his research -- and that's when he uncovered a piece of information rarely mentioned in the reading wars: Whole language is bad, but phonics is not much better. According to Diane McGuinness, author of *Why Our Children Can't Read*, whole language leaves about 50 percent of students behind, but phonics itself fails 30 percent of students.

As Bergman suspected, the phonics vs. whole language debate is barely relevant. According to recent research, the problem with that lowest tier of readers -- conservatively referred to as the "bottom 20 percent" -- is quite often an impairment of something called phonemic awareness, also referred to as phonological processing skills. Though the concept of phonemic awareness has begun to gain currency only in the last few years -- thanks largely to research funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Development -- what the term describes is surprisingly basic, and, in fact, was identified by Russian researcher D.B. Elkonin in the early '70s. Essentially, phonemic awareness is the ability to distinguish individual sounds within a syllable, and to blend and manipulate those sounds. In an extreme case, a child who lacks phonemic awareness will not be able to tell you that the word "cat" is broken up into the sounds "k," "a" and "t." If you ask such a child to say "cat" without the "t" sound, she will not be able to do it.

Writing is, of course, a code for oral language. A child who cannot segment a word into an ordered set of sounds will have trouble grasping the basic concept of reading: that letters correspond to sounds. Thus, they will have trouble decoding written words, and poor decoding ability is the single biggest predictor of poor reading performance.

The trick is to test for phonemic awareness directly. Testing basic reading ability is not sufficient: Because children in kindergarten and first grade can

memorize the limited number of written words they are expected to know, they often appear able to decode words. A better test is to ask children to read nonsense words, such as "nad" or "mork." If they can pronounce words like those, then they are decoding properly.

Poor phonemic awareness can result from sociolinguistic causes -- for instance, children who aren't read to frequently and early in life often have problems. But Bergman stresses that not all problems with phonemic awareness stem from environmental factors; many have a biological basis. "You can read all you want to that child," says Bergman, "and it won't help."

Most of what's commonly referred to as dyslexia is caused by a lack of phonemic awareness. When Philip, in one of his first middle school assignments, wrote "seetsh" instead of "sheets," it was not because he saw words or letters backwards. It was because he could not differentiate the order of the sounds he heard.

That middle school assignment prompted Bergman to find a new way to help his son. For most honors history students, it would be simple to compile a list of the characteristics of prehistoric man. But Bergman came home one day in 1986 to find the floor littered with crumpled paper. Philip had labored so heavily over the final version of his homework, he had worn erasure holes in the paper.

Bergman decided to develop a talking computer. He chose to program a Commodore Amiga. With the help of extra memory, a souped-up processor and some computer programmers, the Amiga was transformed into what Bergman calls the Bridge, a learning tool that would pronounce words as Philip typed them. When he keyed in "seetsh," he would be able to immediately hear that it was wrong and try again.

At first, Bergman paid his medical transcription service to key in Philip's class materials, so the computer could read them to him. The system allowed him to "take notes" by selecting sentences to transfer to an outline file, and quizzed him for comprehension. Most importantly, it freed him from dependence on aides and parents. Three months after beginning to use the Bridge, Philip's stress level had decreased so much that he stopped seeing his psychologist. Commodore, the company that made the Amiga, featured Bergman and his son in a national advertising campaign, and the response was tremendous. "After 3,000 inquiries," Bergman says, "I stopped counting."

Bergman wasn't selfish with his invention. In 1987, he loaned the Bridge to the University of Houston's Diagnostic Learning Center for use in a remedial summer program. There, he says, one graduate student with four students and four computers outperformed one-on-one instruction -- which is usually considered the Cadillac of education methods. Children in the Bridge group, who initially tested lower than or equal to the control group on various skills

including reading comprehension, outperformed the control group by the end of the session.

Bergman also loaned a Bridge computer to one of his neurological patients, the son of Marguerite Held. When Held, the language arts specialist at Heflin Elementary in Alief Independent School District, saw what the program could do, she asked Bergman to let her try it with students who needed help getting ready for the state achievement test at Heflin. Again, a lower-performing Bridge-tutored group outperformed students who were less needy at the outset.

The school agreed to purchase more computers and continue the project. But then Bergman ran into a problem he says indicates the way schools are run. Teachers who plotted "Individual Education Plans" for learning-disabled students recommended that the Bridge program be continued in middle school. But Alief's middle schools didn't have the appropriate equipment, so the project died on the vine.

In 1993, the Bridge went to HISD's Wesley Elementary, one of a group of charter schools headed by Thaddeus Lott. While the principal of Wesley, Lott became an education cause celebre when the district asked him to stop using Distar, a highly structured phonics program, and adopt a whole language curriculum instead. He refused, and in 1991, Wesley's scores were so high the district began to investigate him for cheating -- a move that made national news. Because reading was Lott's specialty, says Bergman, "We weren't allowed to talk about reading. So we used the Bridge for writing." (Bergman also points out that by fifth grade, even Wesley's students have slipped below grade level in reading.) Still, the Bridge was successful yet again: Third graders' passing rates on the writing portion of the TAAS test increased 7 percent; in fifth grade, they increased by 22 percent.

Held, who oversaw the Bridge at Wesley and now helps out at TRI, says until she met Bergman, she was a dedicated whole language teacher. "I came to the realization that there was a whole group of kids we didn't know what to do with," she says, adding that she agrees with recent news reports that teachers do not learn how to teach reading. "I started to learn about teaching reading three years ago," she says. "And I've taught for 25 years -- now, that's scary."

Today, Held says, there is plenty of talking computer software for special education kids, but it is aimed mostly at kindergarten through second grade. "They don't understand how many other children -- like ESL children -- could benefit." Bergman plans to develop new software for TRI. For those few kids that the Institute has not been able to help, he says, the hundreds of hours of help that a computer can provide may be the only affordable answer.

Despite the Bridge's success, neither the University of Houston nor Houston's public schools showed an interest in continuing the project, which needed to

be updated because the Amiga computer was no longer in production. "Schools don't want an outsider to come in and tell them how to teach," Held explains, joking that as a trained educator, she served as a "front" for Bergman. "They really feel threatened."

Because of the Bridge, in 1991 Bergman won the prestigious Jefferson Award, given by the federal government to recognize outstanding service. He was also recognized by Mayor Bob Lanier and the Texas Education Agency. But while Bergman was riding high, his son Philip was floundering.

That year, Philip had attended an intensive summer reading program at the AVKO (Audio Visual Kinesthetic Oral) Educational Research Foundation in Michigan. The program was phonics-based and intensive, and it boosted Philip's word attack skills to the "17th grade" -- a post-college level. When the ability to sound out words increases, then, with practice, word identification -- the instant recognition of a word that makes fast reading possible -- increases as well.

Philip returned to the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts for his junior year reading at ninth grade level -- three grade levels above where he began the previous year. On Bergman's graph, the line tracing Philip's progress in word attack leapt upward to well above the average, where a child with Philip's IQ would normally be. But just as quickly, that line came crashing back down to almost its previous level.

HISD's plan for helping Philip centered on the talking computer. Bergman provided two Bridge computers for Philip -- one at school and one at home -- and the district agreed to transcribe his textbooks in certain subjects so they could be processed by the computer. But in the fall of 1991, the transcriptions grew sporadic. Then they stopped altogether. In the spring of 1992, the art department placed Philip -- who had previously excelled in art -- on probation.

Over the summer, HISD's special education deputy superintendent died of cancer, and in the fall Philip's transcriptions did not resume. The new special education coordinator refused to meet with Bergman; Bergman says he was told his son was doing "just fine" without the transcriptions.

By federal law, a school cannot change an Individualized Education Plan without first notifying parents, but Bergman had not been notified. When he tried to get the school to resume transcription of Philip's textbooks, the school told Bergman to see the district. The district told Bergman to see the school. Finally, Bergman filed a complaint with the TEA. The district argued that since Philip was passing his classes, he was receiving "great" educational benefit. Public school districts, HISD argued, are not required to offer programs "which will maximize a student's educational potential"-- and furthermore Philip had "very little room for academic improvement." That fall, Philip had failed calculus and was making Cs in his other subjects.

The TEA ordered the district to continue the transcriptions and pay Bergman's attorney's fees. Afterward, the district refused Bergman's request to discuss the defenses they had made during the trial, and stalled on Bergman's attorney's fees. Finally, Bergman sued the district in federal court -- for, among other things, false testimony and violation of civil rights. The TEA had found Bergman's tape recordings of meetings about Philip contradicted the testimony of HISD's witnesses. The district settled the case for an undisclosed amount; Bergman estimates the whole ordeal cost HISD well over \$200,000.

But his battle was not yet over. The district had halted implementation of the Individualized Education Plan for Philip's younger brother, Paul, and Bergman again filed a TEA complaint. This time, the district agreed to mediation. Bergman seized the opportunity to ask the district for something he couldn't get in court. He wanted HISD to study how the district teaches reading. The district formed a committee to do just that, but it quickly lapsed into inactivity.

But as a result of Bergman's advocacy, when HISD responded to Governor George W. Bush's call for all Texas schoolchildren to be reading on grade level by third grade, the district appointed Bergman to serve on yet another committee: the PEER Committee on Reading. The committee's nationally recognized report, issued in 1996, calls for a "balanced approach" that includes phonemic awareness, alphabetic awareness, print awareness, spelling, reading practice and reading comprehension. It also calls for the early assessment of children's reading skills -- though Bergman worries the assessments won't go far enough.

To implement the plan, the district trained 3,333 kindergarten, first, second and third-grade teachers for five days each in the 1996-97 school year -- a move Deputy Superintendent for Reading Phyllis Hunter calls "unprecedented." This year, HISD trained another 3,000 elementary school teachers for three days each.

Bergman praises the district for the strides it has made -- it's now in the forefront nationally with regard to phonemic awareness -- but he says the committee report was still "a compromise" because the district's representatives were pro-whole language. "We had to let everyone put something in the report they could be happy with before everyone put up barbed-wire fences around their position," he laments.

Clearly, Bergman doesn't think phonemic awareness is anything to compromise on -- particularly not for that bottom 20 percent. "When we say that phonemic awareness is a necessary skill for reading," he says, "we mean necessary. Not that it's nice. Not that it makes it more convenient. It's a necessary skill. You don't have legs, you don't walk. You don't have phonemic awareness, you don't learn to read."

If Bergman has changed the way HISD teaches reading and the programs it offers, Hunter seems somewhat reluctant to admit it. Asked what effect he's had, she pauses for a few moments, then says firmly, "He was a very active member of the PEER committee."

The Texas Reading Institute is a no-frills operation. Tucked into a corporate office park in west Houston, it is equipped with simple tables and privacy dividers, and is cluttered with paper and instructional materials. Two small rooms can be used for diagnostic testing or tutorials. During the school year, TRI has only ten or twelve students on a regular basis. One of them is Gregg Clement, the institute's "miracle child."

Gregg, 16, sits across from his tutor, Eleanor Boyce. Gregg easily reads a passage about the many uses of salt from a book called *Getting the Main Idea*. Then Eleanor helps him to visualize the information -- an essential component of comprehension. "When you see all this salt," she asks, "what color would the salt be?"

Gregg pauses for a few seconds. His face doesn't move; his pronounced, pale brow doesn't furrow. It's as if every spare bit of energy is focused on the question at hand. Finally, he answers, "Probably, like, white."

Gregg's dyslexia is so severe, and his aural comprehension so slow, he could easily be mistaken for mentally deficient. He also has vision problems and attention deficit disorder. But when Gregg would lose his place reading, or substitute in words that weren't on the page, his teachers told the Clements he was "using his imagination." When Gregg reached middle school his mother, Dorothy, decided that Gregg might do better if she home-schooled him. But in eighth grade, Gregg stopped reading altogether. He simply refused to pick up a book.

That's when the Clements discovered Gregg's dyslexia. The testing TRI performed, Clement says, was "the most perfect picture of Gregg we ever saw. It was like a word portrait of Gregg." It explained why Gregg could answer oral questions in class but did not understand jokes. It explained why sometimes he zeroed in on insignificant information. And it explained why he couldn't read.

At first Gregg had only 15 hours of instruction at the institute -- about an hour every two weeks. The sessions doubled as training for Dorothy, who then worked with Gregg at home. The reading program Bergman uses most, Phono-Graphix, has workbooks designed for parents to use with their kids at home. By the end of one year, Gregg's basic reading grade level had gone from 4.7 to 8.9. One of the first advanced books he read was *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. "It felt like I was in the story," he says after another long pause. "Like I was Robinson Crusoe." Now he is on a maintenance program, working primarily on visualization and comprehension.

"There's a kid who would have fallen through the cracks," Bergman says of Gregg. "No one knew what to do with him. What [special help] he might have qualified for would not have been a bona fide effort to bring up his reading."

But if Bergman has his way, the next Gregg Clement to come along will get the help he needs -- in school. Last week, TRI conducted its first Phono-Graphix teacher training in HISD, at Stevenson Elementary. Another elementary school, Carillo, has already asked to host the next training session.

Bergman is especially excited about Stevenson, because it is 97 percent Hispanic, and he wants Phono-Graphix to reach minority children, not just those whose parents have the time and money to come to his institute. At Stevenson, principal Mary Cherbonnier hopes the program will help that bottom 20 percent of students -- kids she calls, simply, "nonreaders."

Bergman hopes so too. Still, he knows he has to be careful. He has learned over the years that combating the district is counterproductive. Because of site-based decision-making, Cherbonnier can choose which programs she uses at her school, thus providing a way for Bergman to sneak in under the radar. "This is the first time we've gone into HISD," he says. He lays a finger to his lips as if tiptoeing past a sentinel standing guard. "Shhh," he says, his eyes twinkling. "Shhh."

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