



MAKING MOVIES IN THE MIND:

ONE ALUM'S PASSION FOR LITERACY

BY CAROL PENDERGAST

ON NANCY BELL'S OFFICE WALL hangs a quote by Aristotle that is the basis of her lifelong quest to understand how we process spoken and written information: "It is impossible even to think without a mental picture."

Recognized internationally for pioneering research on the relationship between mental imagery and the acquisition of language and literacy skills, Bell began her career with an undergraduate degree in elementary education from Cal Poly, followed by a master's degree in education in 1981. A research project with Pat Lindamood to study the relationship between phoneme (or speech and sound) awareness and reading and

Bell's research explored how individuals with specific language-processing problems use imagery and sensory systems in different ways along a spectrum from dyslexia to hyperlexia and autism. Her success results from matching specific deficiencies in reading or comprehension to a structured sequence of exercises integrating imagery and language.

As her organization has grown, Bell has been able to expand her research, working with Georgetown University, for example, on a study of adults with dyslexia whose brain function had undergone statistically significant changes after Lindamood-Bell interventions.

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spelling skills led to the lifelong association and business partnership of Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes. Based in San Luis Obispo, the organization has more than 40 learning centers in the United States and England.

In the early 1980s, while working with a Cal Poly undergraduate who was unable to learn to spell and had severe reading disabilities, Bell was astonished to discover that the student was nevertheless able to give a detailed summary of a story. When pressed, he told her, "I just make movies when I read."

That remark ultimately ignited a passion in Bell, who wanted to understand "the sensory processing underlying written and oral-language comprehension." As Albert Einstein explained, "If I can't picture it, I can't understand it."

She has also partnered with public schools in predominately underprivileged and under-represented areas. Ten years ago, District 60 in Pueblo, Colo., had some of the lowest test scores in the state. After several years of intensive collaboration with Bell, the district is now a nationally acclaimed model for student achievement.

In her quest to make a difference, Bell has embarked on an ambitious project to increase global literacy. She is currently recruiting a Literacy Corps, modeled on the Peace Corps, to take her program to schools across the country, and eventually the globe. In the words of one Literacy Corps member, "We change lives. We teach children crucial skills and abilities that alter the way they engage with the world for the rest of their lives." □