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Suggested Procedures for Stimulating Reading Instruction in the School Program

Velma V. Watters

The procedures for improving reading instruction discussed here may be considered from the point of view of initial steps in developing a program of reading on the elementary school level, or suggested procedures which might be employed to enrich a program already begun. Further, this information could be used as criteria to evaluate present practices, and as a guide for more vigorous and effective action.

ELEMENTS ESSENTIAL IN THE TOTAL STRUCTURE

In setting the stage for developing a reading program that will be functional in the light of the needs, interests, and abilities of the learner, some consideration must be given to these basic factors such as: recognizing the problem, formulating and understanding specific purposes, realizing the importance of establishing desirable working relationships, creating an atmosphere which is stimulating and challenging where the staff can explore together new ways of solving old problems. Observing, studying, planning, and evaluating must be continuous. Emerging beliefs may be framed into a statement of philosophy.

When identifying the problems of the learner, contributing factors must be considered. The home, the school, and the community are three major ones.

Such questions as these may be asked about each:

Home

What is the economic status of the home?
What kinds of reading materials does the home provide?
Has the child moved from place to place?

School

When did the child enter school?
How many different schools has the child attended?
What have previous intelligence tests revealed as to his capacity to achieve?

Community

How have various community agencies affected the child?
What influence has modern technology had upon the child's attitude?

These and similar questions may be of importance to those who are interested in planning an effective program of action in a given situation. In our school we were primarily concerned about determining the "grass roots" of many revealed and unmet needs of our children which were believed to have caused them to be retarded in reading. If we can determine the extent to which various environmental factors affect the growth and development of children, we can more effectively improve our reading programs.

It was important also, for us to have an understanding of the general attitude of the community toward the school, and how these two institutions, home and school — could cooperate more effectively so as to help our youngsters solve some of their problems.

There was another issue confronting us. Competition was obvious. It had to be coped with by the school from the standpoint of modern technical devices such as the radio, television, automobile, and others. By talking with our children, we were able to determine their scope of interest in these devices.

ENRICHING THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

In-service growth and development must be encouraged constantly if scientific analysis is to be made of the child's reading difficulties and the necessary guidance given.

A desirable audio-visual education program which provides for a wide variety of usable teaching materials and equipment for the teacher and the child, utilization of community resources which serve to enhance the experiences of the learner, the school-community survey whose findings may be revealing and as a result followed through and research and travel are desirable practices. Such practices would improve the instructional program and promote a greater degree of competence in teachers.

SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES TO BE CONSIDERED

A program begins with a felt need. So, the needs of the retarded reader must be determined, the specific difficulties diagnosed, and a functional program planned and gradually put into action.

According to Carter and McGinnis,[1] individuals with disabilities in reading may be identified by information resulting from the administration of various tests and by systematic observation of the child. The teacher should consider simultaneously both sources of information.

Tests are merely tools to be used by the teacher in determining useful information such as:

1. The reading level of the child. This is generally stated in terms of achievement ages, grade scores, or percentiles.

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[1]Homer L. J. Carter and Dorothy McGinnis, *Learning to Read: A Handbook for Teachers,* McGraw-Hill, 1953, p. 33.

2. The mental maturity of the child. This is frequently shown by the mental age and the I. Q.

3. The kinds of reading ability and skills which the child has and/or lacks.

4. Physical factors affecting reading performance such as vision and audition.

5. Personal and social factors which may be related to reading achievement.

Typical manifestations of reading disability which are frequently observed in the classroom are:

1. Reading words instead of ideas

2. Guessing and bluffing in reading situations

3. Failing to enjoy reading activities

4. Marked reversal tendencies

5. Unwillingness to guess at meaning of new words

6. Limited rate of reading

7. Alphabet confusions

8. Limited comprehension

9. Inability to recognize words

10. Inability to do satisfactory work

11. Manifestations of emotional and personal deviation.

The alert and understanding teacher will observe the boys and girls, talk informally with them, make case studies, visit the home and talk with the parents, and use check lists and cumulative and anecdotal records.[1] These are a few of the objective devices to be employed.

When environmental and physical factors which can cause the learner to be retarded are carefully diagnosed, it is not too difficult a task to consider the kind of treatment necessary for him. This may be the point to begin developing a program or enrich or evaluate one which is already in progress. In the light of this, effort may be put forth to attain objectives and to follow basic principles as guides.

Since one of the major functions of the school is to make reading of greatest value to boys and girls in daily living, if wisely utilized, principles can be effective in helping to determine a sense of direction. These[2] are only a sampling:

1. The school can make reading a part of the child's daily living by making it functional.

[2]*Ibid.*, pp. 168-70.

2. Adequate reading materials are essential so that every child in a class may read at his own level and not necessarily at the grade level in which he is enrolled.

3. Learning to read is a continuous process.

APPROACHES TO BE USED IN DEVELOPING THE PROGRAM

Teaching children to be skillful readers in the modern school is in reality guiding them in experiences which are meaningful as the child acquires and learns to use the reading tool for effective living.

Since the curriculum is thought of as the sum total of the child's experiences, teaching children to read can never be considered apart from all of the experiences of the child. It is a part of them if it is active rather than passive.

Both learning to read and using the tools of reading are of themselves an important part of the child's experiences, that is, if growth in reading is promoted in the light of the whole child.

From the point of view of the administrator, there would be need to set up agencies for the co-operative study of the adequacy of the current program and for identifying the changes necessary either to recover lost ground or to adjust it better to expanding needs or both.

He needs to make adequate provision for interpreting recent trends and new developments to the staff as a whole, for helping teachers of limited preparation bring themselves up to date, and cultivate a vision of new possibilities among those who follow outmoded practices. The administrator should secure funds, prepared personnel, instructional facilities, freedom for staff members to do essential individual and committee work, and other resources required in effecting and maintaining needed improvements.

Other jobs are promoting the wise selection or development of improved curriculum materials and instructional aids for use in attaining clearly defined goals; providing sympathetic and constructive help to teachers in their effort to improve the efficiency of classroom activities and in evaluating of the results attained; interpreting to the public recent changes in the reading program and additional improvements needed, and enlisting its wholehearted cooperation.

All of these steps should be taken within the framework of democratic procedure. Experience shows clearly that the success which attends such steps depends in large measure upon the breadth

of understanding of administrative officers, their tact and sincerity, and the dynamic quality of their leadership.[3]

The nature of a situation determines largely the jobs which need to be done by the administrator. For example, in some instances an attempt should be made to reduce the size of classes and to see that every teacher is supplied with as adequate facilities as possible in order to do a desirable job.

In other instances, administrators may recommend promotion and salary increases; initiate a program of periodic faculty and study group meetings for in-service teachers; hold conferences in which preplanning, postplanning, and evaluating may be done; stress the importance of attendance in workshops and in summer school; make teachers aware of observations and demonstrations; provide opportunity for the use of a flexible daily program where there are fewer and larger blocks of time and where grouping is encouraged and made effective; visit to classrooms; participate in community projects and organizations such as the PTA; and engage in travel and extensive professional and non-professional reading.

Since it is the teacher who determines the success of the reading program, it becomes his responsibility to study the child and understand him. This however, should be done with the assistance of the administrator in the particular situation, the administrative staff, and the home. An understanding of the child and his environment is basic in getting a program started or improving one. In the light of this, these are suggested procedures:

1. The survey approach can be effective from the point of view of the school or from the point of view of the community. In either instance, opportunity is provided for a study of the child and his environment.

2. Recent investigation shows that there may be a program organized by reading levels. Here children of both the primary and upper grades are given instruction in reading as two separate units, and each pupil reads at his own level which is helpful to him. Materials are selected in terms of levels of interests; individual study and dramatizations are emphasized procedures.

Another approach to be used is the Cooperative Planning Basis. Current research shows that the essentials of this program include an inventory of the learner, a rich variety of materials organized around content units, systematic development of basic reading skills and abilities, and a continuous check on individual progress. As a part of the pupil inventory a study is made of general ability, the specific reading difficulties, the interests and the tastes of the individual members of the class. In addition to basal readers, a wide variety of selected materials is made available. Individual instruction as well as class and small group activities characterize

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[3]William S. Gray, "Improved Reading Programs," *EDUCATION,* 71:535-540, May, 1951.

the procedure. Motivation is achieved in part by teacher-class definition of specific objectives, by cooperatively planned study activities and appraisal procedures, and by socialized discussions.[4]

Differentiated instruction is an approach which provides opportunity for the maximum development of each child.

Instruction of this type provides for grouping and a great variety of materials so that committees which have been set up may take care of different areas of the activity and may do research to find out things they want to know.

This kind of approach creates a social climate in the classroom where democratic attitudes can exist. It provides further opportunity to work out a plan that fits the particular setting in which the child is employed. In this plan the reading program is obviously a part of the total curriculum.

Harris indicated clearly in a discussion what may take place in a situation when there is differentiated instruction. He said that there is organization of the class on the basis of whole class activities, individualized activity, and homogenous and heterogeneous grouping. In whole class activities, provision is made for a variety of kinds of audience situations where children have major responsibility for contributing. They may read a choice selection to their classmates, give a book report, present an imitation radio broadcast, or give current events—using probably *My Weekly Reader* on different levels or the daily newspaper. There may be an open book experience for them, a review of alphabetizing where they may give the letter coming before rather than after another. Particularly is this desirable for the upper grades. Much free reading may be done silently with the use of library books. For improvement of individual skills, a series of practice materials may be used, or there might be a work period activity. It is possible for all children to be doing the same thing at the same time but on different levels if the major phases of the reading program which are developmental—acquiring skills, functional—applying reading in many other areas, and recreational—developing attitudes, interests, and appreciations, are emphasized.* Homogenous grouping is the conventional type approach. The class is divided into groups. Children in a particular group must be able to use the same materials; the general reading level is on the basis of the book used; all children having the same difficulty in the same skill are grouped together, especially is this the case in the upper grades; special groups are formed only when some skill has been missed; the level of reading is important in terms of the book used.

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[4]E. A. Betts, *Foundations of Reading Instruction.* Revised edition. Atlanta: American Book Company, 1954. Pp. 56-57.

*This is a portion of a discussion led by A. J. Harris who was a member of the staff of the Workshop in Reading, and the leader of the section for administrators at the elementary school level at the University of Chicago, July, 1953.

It may be a question as to whether all reading should be done by groups. According to Harris, reading activities in all modern schools are of three main types; developmental, recreational, and functional. With this kind of organization grouping can be desirable if (1) it permits children to enjoy learning together, (2) if it enables the teacher to suggest the inclusion of children in groups where they get a particular needed experience, (3) if each child is enabled to form a friendly unthreatened relationship with his teacher based on the help, encouragement, and interest of the teacher as well as the opportunity to show the child that he is a person regardless to his reading achievement, (4) if the teacher strives to learn more and more about each child's school adjustment as his behavior is observed in this social microcosm, and (5) if it gives the teacher opportunity to have more fun teaching and to become a better teacher.[5]

Someone has said that "to watch a teacher wisely guiding children in a classroom where grouping techniques are well used is to see at work an artist whose medium is education."

A last suggested approach is that of the Visiting Readers where children are sent to other grade rooms during a block set aside for reading. Assignments to these tentative groupings are based on fairly detailed analyses of difficulties. For other activities each pupil returns to his home room. Immature children who usually would enter the first grade are either retained in the kindergarten or admitted to a junior first grade.[6]

THE HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

In addition to the many approaches which may be utilized, the important aspect of home-school relationship cannot be overlooked in improving the reading program.

Early in this discussion it was indicated that the home must help the school accomplish its purposes.

Today it is obvious to both parents and educators that we must work together if we are to be successful in helping boys and girls learn to read and enjoy doing it. It is a joint enterprise requiring some activities to be carried on at home and others at school.

Although parents usually do not have the specialized skills and techniques necessary to do the whole job, they should be kept informed about modern reading methods and the reason for changes that have been brought since they were in school.

On the other hand, we are sometimes amazed at the fact that parents are much further ahead than we think in analyzing the reading needs of their youngsters.

However, they do not always realize that the most common causes for reading disability are in the emotional blocks which chil-

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[5]Albert J. Harris, "Grouping in the Teaching of Reading." The *Reading Teacher*. Vol. 5, September, 1951.
[6]Betts, op. cit., pp. 60-61.

dren have. An example, according to Helen M. Robinson, is that one of the most common causes of reading retardation is an unstable emotional climate in the home. She proved that a stable home environment has a definite relationship to reading progress.[7]

Another important finding in this connection is that parents should be helped to see that the usual remedial techniques may not be the answer, that the real solution may be removing an emotional problem or block that prevents learning.[8]

The nature of a good reading program in terms of what is included in it will be determined only to the extent that from grades one to junior high school, we are able to provide the experiences and preparation that make for readiness to learn to read with ease and rapidity; to promote the interests, attitudes and skills that enable pupils to read simple material with observed attention to meaning; to provide rapid mastery of the basic attitudes and skills involved in both good oral reading and thoughtful silent reading of material relating largely to familiar experience and within a vocabulary of 3,000 words; to extend experiences and satisfy interests beyond the range of familiar experience, and to develop increased power and efficiency in reading in such area; to extend and refine the reading attitudes and interests and the school needs of young adolescents.[9]

The purposes and objectives of traditional instruction in reading contributed to regimentation, to compartmentalization of instruction, to the satisfying of interests, and to the termination of reading instruction at the lower levels of school. The purposes and objectives of modern instruction in reading have tended to emphasize critical interpretation, the perennial nature of reading instruction, the development of worthwhile interests and attitudes of approach, and the social uses of language.[10]

According to E. A. Betts,[11] a reorientation cannot be achieved by a mere rearrangement of pupil desks, by inserting in the school program a period called "activities," by administering a number of new tests; by establishing remedial rooms, by the purchase of a new series of basal textbooks, by designating groups of children by some term other than "grade," or by a sudden revision of home reports. Instead, the first reorganization must be made in terms of the approach to the problem.

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[7]Helen M. Robinson, *Why Children Fail in Reading.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1946.
[8]Nellie C. Morrison, "Parents Readiness for Today's Reading Methods," *The Reading Teacher.* 6:34-38, 44, September 1952.
[9]Selected from one of a series of lectures made by William S. Gray in a Workshop in Reading at the University of Chicago, July 1953.
[10]E. A. Betts, *Foundations of Reading Instruction.* Revised edition. Atlanta: American Book Company, 1954. P. 98.
[11]*Ibid.,* p. 50.