

read to him. Enrich his environment.

Even though the parents may have had all their own experience in a graded school, it is not difficult for them to understand that annual blocks of work (called grade 1, 2 or 3) with hurdles to jump at the end which we call *promotion* are not at all necessary in the school progress of children. Parents also understand readily that children in any age groups vary widely in their stage of maturation insofar as their ability to master certain skills is concerned. Hence the teachers at Hawthorne School have become convinced that it is not actually the parents of the children who bind the school to the traditional grade arrangement. However, they have found that any change that is proposed must be thoroughly discussed with the parents.

While there are many problems left

for the teacher to solve in the primary school, it has become evident that the problems of promotion and failure have been eased. The teacher feels freer to teach the child according to his needs and the parent accepts the fact that the child may move more slowly without being socially ostracized because of failure. The child is not given any task to do before he is ready to do it but every attempt is made to keep him progressing at his own rate as nearly as it can be determined. The teachers are developing ways of knowing more about their pupils and are greatly improving in their conference technique. Also it has brought the teacher and parent closer together in the total job of educating the child. Does this require extra effort? Yes, it frequently does, but at this time it appears that the results justify this effort.

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## *Matching Ten Reading Levels in One Classroom*

**DON H. PARKER, RENA KING  
and RUTH A. HOLT**

A ninth grade English teacher is dismayed to find that her pupils range from grade three through grade thirteen in their reading ability. With consultant assistance, she institutes a program that provides materials and help to each pupil at his own reading level.

—**A**ND IF you have an average classroom, let's say a ninth grade, you probably have a range of eight or ten different reading grade levels among your pupils," said the speaker.

"Eight different reading levels,—in my room? And I'm using only one textbook? Oh, no! It can't be true," thought the ninth grade English teacher in the

eighteenth row back. It was a warm, early fall afternoon. Around her sat some three hundred of the county's teachers. Maybe she hadn't heard correctly. She would ask the others later. But what followed was even more disconcerting.

"You ask," continued the speaker, "how well your pupils *should* read? Possibly you are one of those who would

answer, 'Well enough to read the ninth grade textbook I use.' Or, possibly you'd be willing to agree with Abe Lincoln. When still a gangling, long-legged youth, he was asked by an opponent hoping to make him appear ridiculous, 'Abe, how long should a man's legs be?' After a moment's consideration, Lincoln replied, 'Long enough to reach the ground.'

"If we accept this analogy in reading, —in all learning, for that matter—we will stop trying to pour thirty-five students into the single mold of one textbook just because they are sitting in the same classroom. Instead, we will provide each student with material that will allow his "reading legs" to reach the solid ground of comprehending what he reads,—regardless of how far down or how far up that may be. Further, we will provide him with the opportunity to progress to higher reading levels, if, as and when his 'reading legs' grow."

The room suddenly became uncomfortably warmer. The English teacher wondered why people had to think such disturbing thoughts. Couldn't we just teach school? Yes, the library and guidance and English courses had stressed individual differences and the need for meeting them, but how, *how*, HOW?

### Ten Reading Levels Identified

The next week the supervisor dropped into the English teacher's room for a visit. "Miss King, I know there must be some differences in reading ability among my pupils, but I don't believe it's like our speaker at the meeting said. I wonder, though, if you'd recommend a reading test I could give and see for myself?"

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A few days later the phone in the supervisor's office rang. It was the English teacher. "This is Ruth Holt at Selma School." There was a note of urgency, even anxiety in her voice. "You know those reading tests? Well, it's even worse than I had dared imagine. I don't have eight reading levels—I have ten! And they range from the third grade to beyond first-year college! What do I do now?"

The supervisor smiled. There were many things she could suggest, but was this the time and place—yet? Here was that gift of Prometheus, that fire of motivation so dear to the heart of the supervisor—a brilliant, yet human flame—demanding the greatest possible care lest it die for lack of fuel or burn itself out against some stone-like barrier. Why not get additional fuel and call in more help to remove the obstacles that are bound to arise before any really on-going, creative force? After all, is it not part of a supervisor's job to know where to go for help?

"Tell you what I'll do," Miss King said. "When I go to Chapel Hill next time, I'll ask that disturbing speaker what he would suggest that we do about it."

If this were true of one school's ninth grade, how about all the other schools? Well, one thing at a time. After all, what good was a School of Education in your own State University if you couldn't sometimes dump your troubles

into its lap? And Mr. Parker, their reading consultant, had stuck his neck out, so now let's see him withdraw it gracefully,—or produce!

At his office in the Reading Laboratory and Clinic, Mr. Parker showed the supervisor how college students were helped in bringing their reading levels up from as low as 6th or 7th grade to that of the average college freshman.

"If so many students are coming out of our high schools four, five or even six years retarded, so that you have to have all these special facilities for them, the high schools must be doing a pretty poor job, wouldn't you say?"

"Not that exactly," said Mr. Parker. "Let's say they're doing as well as they know how at present. You see, most of the things we know in reading are relatively new and they are just beginning to find their way out of the experimental laboratories and into the hands of people who will put them to practical, everyday use."

"But how is that ever going to happen fast enough?" queried Miss King.

"That's a job for all of us and it looks like it's happening pretty fast right here and now," replied the reading consultant. He went on to explain that each student who came to the Reading Laboratory and Clinic for help was studied to determine his present reading level and his expected reading level as determined by tests of reading ability and learning capacity. Next each student was given an opportunity to place his foot on a "reading ladder" at the level at which he was now able to read and achieve reasonable understanding. He kept daily charts of his progress. As his efficiency increased, he tackled more and more difficult mate-

rials. This same idea could be extended downward and adapted to classroom work for junior and senior high school students.

"Then, as I understand it," said Miss King, "the situation in the high schools boils down to this: First, we should be teaching certain reading skills attuned to the developmental needs of the child at each stage of his growth as he progresses through school, plus the special skills involved in reading in particular subject areas. Second, since we have failed to do this beyond the early elementary grades, we must now help students go back and acquire the skills they lack so they can begin to read as well as their learning capacity allows them."

"Exactly."

"Now that Miss Holt has found the actual, present reading abilities of her students, her next step would be to find out how well each *ought* to read with some test that does not depend entirely on reading and verbal problems to measure his learning capacity, as so many intelligence tests do?"

"Right!"

"And the next step would be to prepare materials for the students that would form a 'reading ladder' on which each could climb to his own highest level at this own rate of learning and help students understand the purpose of this activity?"

"You're on the beam!"

"We might even call it a reading laboratory in our own school, mightn't we?"

"I see no reason why it wouldn't be as much a reading laboratory for your students as this one is for college students."

## Testing and Reading

In the following weeks more data was gathered. The Diagnostic Reading Tests: Survey Section had shown reading ability ranging from grade three to grade thirteen plus with a mean of 8.0. With a grade placement of 9.5, this meant an average retardation among these ninth graders of one and one-half years! Were these youngsters just not very bright? Maybe they should not be expected to read up to the level of their grade placement? Answer: They should—provided they had acquired the necessary tool skills of reading. Why? Because their actual capacity for learning to read as shown by standardized tests of intelligence comprising both verbal and non-verbal factors (SRA Primary Mental Abilities) showed a reading-grade-expectancy equal to their grade placement, i.e., 9.5 (mean I.Q., 103). Armed with these facts, the supervisor arranged for a three-way conference with the principal.

"When I see people with facts and a plan for dealing with them, I'm willing to stretch our slim budget to the breaking point," said the principal. "If you're willing to put in the time to prepare the materials you've described, the least I can do is see that you get them."

The teacher and the supervisor "set to" with a will, checking from time to time on technical details with the University's reading consultant. The Charles E. Merrill *Skilltexts* formed the basis for providing ten different reading grade levels of materials, grades three through thirteen. Finally the day came to introduce these materials to the students.

"Can each of you run as fast as the

others?" Miss Holt asked the class. After discussion, there were other questions. How tall *should* a ninth grader be? What is the "normal" speed of talking? Normal? Well, it began to look as though being different were normal—normal, that is, just so long as being normal is the individual's best expression of himself in the eyes of self and society. Then came the explanation of the purposes of the new miniature reading laboratory they were to have right in their own classroom; how it enabled each student to begin right now to read successfully—and to understand what he was reading. During the reading lab period which followed, each student received a folder containing an interesting story with its comprehension check, in which he could read with 80 to 90 per cent understanding, whether his ability was third grade, eighth, tenth, etc. When, in subsequent periods, his Daily Progress Chart showed consistent performance on similar stories, he stepped up to the next level.

When he had finished his skill-building work for the period, the average student found fifteen or twenty minutes to indulge in free reading from a group of guidance materials. The entire Junior and Senior series of *Life Adjustment* booklets (Science Research Associates), easily accessible in their wire rack, formed the nucleus for a sort of "reading for problem solving" activity. Several copies of the Scott, Foresman *Into Your Teens* and The National Forum *Being Teen Aged* were also made available. The teacher started folders on "Classroom Manners," "Home Manners," "Boy-Girl Relationships," etc. Students eagerly added to these with

clippings brought from home. Thus, in addition to materials for building specific reading skills at ten different grade levels, books discussing almost every teen-age problem were available at four or five different levels of reading difficulty. Reading for a purpose was fast becoming a reality for these ninth graders.

### **Learning New Words**

Since the diagnostic reading test had shown a vocabulary deficiency in most students, possible reasons for this were talked through in class discussion. Why was a good vocabulary important? How does one learn new words? What is the best thing I can do to begin improving my vocabulary? Out of this developed a personal notebook for words encountered during literature study, or simply a word the student might hear and want for his own. Each was put on a single page. Magazine pictures or original quick sketches were used to illustrate its meanings. Underneath, the word was syllabicated, the dictionary definition given. Then came a sentence in the student's own words, forming the final link in the chain of associations binding it to the student "for keeps." Part of this was done as homework, part as classwork. In addition, students whose Daily Progress Charts began to show up unusual weaknesses in vocabulary and word attack skills found needed review and drill in special auxiliary folders with relatively high interest-level illustrations. These were created from the Scott, Foresman *Basic Skills in Reading* and the Webster *Eye and Ear Fun, Book IV*.

Activities described above were carried on twice, and sometimes three

times a week in each of the three ninth grade English classes. On other days, the more traditional English course was followed. However, as this is written, six weeks since the start of the reading laboratory work, there has been a tendency for the students to want to discuss their ideas gained in free reading during reading lab periods and literature study.

Out of the total English-reading-guidance orientation, mental hygiene has emerged naturally and logically. Characters found in literature come alive when their motivations and behavior are compared with the students' own. The frustrations encountered in learning to read better, in boy-girl relationships, home problems, etc., are seen in a problem-solving context. Reading becomes both a means and an end. To synthesize their findings and bring some of the relatively abstract concepts of mental hygiene to more concrete form, the students created a series of frieze-like posters. Illustrative of these posters is one featuring a free-hand drawing of a bucking bronco with the caution: "Don't let your emotions throw you!"

### **Evaluation of the Project**

What do the students think of all this? An effort to find out was made by asking five questions after the students had experienced seventeen periods of specific reading laboratory work. A brief summary of the responses of sixty students follows:

**Question One:** Do you like the reading laboratory? Answers: Yes, 43; some, 8; no, 9.

**Question Two:** Why do you like the reading lab? Answers: Improves my

reading speed and comprehension, 38; interesting reading material, 24; varies classwork (to get out of English, said one!), enjoyable, improves vocabulary, etc., 18.

Question Three: What have you learned so far in the reading lab? Answers: New information from stories, 29; improved reading speed, 28; new words, 26; understand better what is read, 16; concentration, using dictionary, dividing words, keep from moving my lips, etc., 45.

Question Four: What is the most difficult thing for you in reading lab? Answers: Word study, 28; all material is easy, 11; remembering what I've read, 8; organizing ideas, 7; getting my mind on the reading, etc., 7.

Question Five: What suggestions for improving the reading lab do you have? Answers: No suggestions, 27; read the material more, 7; have reading material more interesting, 7; put reading lab in more schools, let some students write and illustrate some folders, should be graded on this work, etc., 14.

What does the teacher think?

"This year, for the first time, I have felt that I could offer my ninth graders reading materials that were on their individual reading levels," said Miss Holt. "Their own evaluation of their progress in reading and their response to the guidance activities since we've begun this program is more than enough reward for the extra time I spent preparing materials. And the materials are good for two or three more years' use!"

Said the supervisor, "We have now gained a beach head on this business of matching reading levels *as they are* in our high schools. The way Miss Holt

has combined measurable growth in reading with guidance in personal problem-solving for each student is a solid step toward what we think of as 'education' in Johnston county. Our next step is to study the relationship of a program like this to the student's total four year high school experience. Then we'll need to help other teachers to adapt these techniques to their needs and still others to teach the specific reading skills of their subject areas."

Miss Patsy Montague, associate state educational supervisor, commented, after visiting one of Miss Holt's classes, "She is doing an outstanding job of combining guidance with the reading program. It seems to me that it is very important in guidance for us to help young people to understand the reasons for their difficulties in any of their subjects and to make plans for correcting these difficulties. The boys and girls seem to be pleased with the results of their work."

While test, re-test results are not yet available, thirty-nine of the seventy-eight students were achieving satisfactory comprehension (85% or above) at a level one year or more above that at which they started, after seventeen hours' work.

"It is not unusual to see two, three and even four years' improvement in ninth grade students' comprehension level during a single year where reading laboratory procedures have continued 30 to 50 hours," said Mr. Parker, who first developed the program in Florida schools as an extension downward of college reading improvement work.

"For those whose learning capacity limits their reading to something less

than grade placement," continued the reading consultant, "the reading laboratory adaptation offers a measure of personal success. The need for providing successful experiences in reading for this wider range of abilities is seen in the fact that whereas only 11 per cent of our school children entered high school in 1900, this figure had risen to 73 per cent by 1940. While before only the very intelligent had to learn to read, now the average and slow learners are faced with the same books. Either we make successful reading and learning experiences available to these slower learners or allow them to drop out of school to become candidates for our bulging juvenile courts. However, it will be noted that this is not a program solely for the slow learner. The rapid learner and the gifted—those reading

beyond their grade placement—are challenged by skill building materials at *their* reading ability level, regardless of how far that may be above the textbook of their grade placement."

To the authors of this article, it seems that Roma Gans has succinctly summarized the benefits while stating the purposes of this frontal attack on the reading problem, in her five eminently simple yet far-reaching goals in reading instruction.

"Guide pupils," she says, "(1) to know *when* it is satisfying and to their advantage to read, both in and out of school, (2) to know how to *select* what to read, (3) to *read skillfully* what is selected, (4) to *appraise critically* the content in terms of its intended use, and (5) to know *how to use* ideas gained from reading."



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