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GEORGE MANOLAKES

Needed Research in Reading

Research in reading instruction can profitably take several directions indicated briefly by this author.

THE COMPLEXITY of the reading act has always provided a wide range of research possibilities. The concern for the effects of reading upon individuals and groups, and for the ways in which reading is affected by their functioning has extended the scope of reading research investigations into psychology, physiology, and many other related areas of study. However, research in reading for those most directly concerned with the effectiveness of teaching and learning must necessarily be defined in terms of the needs for the improvement of instruction in the elementary and secondary schools.

Our attempts to apply related research

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findings have often resulted in distortions that have limited their usefulness, and our efforts to emulate these studies have further extended the fragmentizing of the instructional process. In accepting the responsibility for research concerned with the instructional program, we not only shall be functioning in the area of our greatest competence, but further will be contributing to a research function that only education can assume.

The need for this research function was dramatically demonstrated by the anxieties that resulted from the highly publicized criticisms of the teaching of reading when research findings proved to be a most effective deterrent to the regressive tendencies that developed in the face of challenge.

The present status of the reading instruction program suggests three pur-

poses toward which instructional research could be directed.

The uncertainties that have resulted for school administrators, teachers, parents and children clearly indicate the need for research that will verify the effectiveness of the many instructional procedures and materials that have been developed at the elementary and secondary school levels. Many of the instructional programs within school systems, buildings and individual classrooms are largely determined by a point of view rather than a sound research base. Although it is important to encourage the individuality of teaching and to guard against a regimented instructional program, it is equally important that differences in practice are not the result of confusion or emotional dedication. The range of practice in the teaching of reading is exceeded only by the range of theory. The most controversial issues in the teaching of reading will continue to be controversial until research can demonstrate the best that we have and the best that we know.

Failure to clarify the status of the present instructional program has contributed to the limited research attention that it has received. For the researcher of today finds no well defined point of departure, and the result is often much repetitive research in terms of theories and ideas that recur periodically. It is sometimes difficult to determine whether reading research is conducting a frontal attack or merely a delaying action to the rear.

Continuous research activity related to the instructional program can further contribute by providing momentum for overcoming the tendency toward rigidity that occurs when procedures become widely accepted and reduced to the level of technique. Many of the more promis-

ing practices in the instruction of reading that emerged as means of attaining certain goals have become terminal points that now resist change. The formalization of small group procedures for instruction that were introduced to provide for individual differences among children has created major obstacles to the attempt to further individualize instruction. The concepts of reading readiness, the use of workbooks and basal readers, visual aids and supplementary materials have become routinized in many situations. Without research to set the sights and to give the assurance that there may be a better way, our present practices can only become more firmly entrenched and more resistant to change.

The exploratory and experimental function that is inherent in the research process is an obvious third purpose in contributing to the effectiveness of the instructional program in reading. The need for research that is concerned with the development of new materials and new procedures is further intensified by the importance that is placed upon reading instruction in schools and communities, since the acceptance of many curricular innovations is dependent upon the clarification of the emphasis that reading and other skills will receive. The lack of adequate research that clarifies the role of reading has created many uncertainties in the discussion of core programs, activity programs and the primary and intermediate divisions.

Instructional research must not only keep pace with curriculum developments, but also with the ever increasing number of influences that contribute to or detract from the language development of children. The greater emphasis on classroom experiences that emerge from needs and interests of children creates a demand for a better understanding of the mass

media that contribute to the development of the interests and concepts. Each attempt to provide an expressive, creative setting for learning produces new questions as the impact of the television set, the comic book, and the out-of-school activities are felt. Departures from course of study and the security of the controlled vocabularies of graded texts and basal readers have introduced new and exciting terms and concepts that defy the sequence and the logical development held to be so important in other years. Although many of the influences upon children have been deplored while others are merely ignored, instructional research must examine these influences if the instructional program is to reflect the demands that modern society imposes upon the youth of today and tomorrow.

Necessary to the development of experimental research related to the instructional program in reading is the need for accompanying research in the area of evaluation. The significance of new materials and new procedures that are directed toward new goals cannot continue to be appraised within the limits of existing evaluative instruments that are primarily concerned with the measurement of a few specific reading skills. These restricted procedures will impose limitations upon research that can only result in the development of programs with an emphasis not too unlike those that existed when the evaluative criteria were developed. Research that seeks to explore new and imaginative areas must develop equally imaginative means of evaluating the effectiveness of the procedures and materials that result.

Research for Instructional Improvement

Although these purposes for instructional research suggest many possible areas for investigation, there are some

priority needs that are significant for the current program of reading instruction as well as for the emphasis that it will receive in the future.

1. Needed research for the development of a positive program of reading instruction.
2. Needed research for the development of more effective teaching and learning experiences.
3. Needed research for consistency with the growth and development of children.

Research and a Positive Program

The need for research that will contribute to the development of a positive program of reading instruction is best illustrated by the apologetic and negative emphasis that has resulted from the abundance of research concerning the "poor reader" and "poor reading." Reading difficulty has been paired as the independent variable with a variety of emotional problems, intellectual competencies, sex differences, the whole range of auditory and visual activity, physiological and neurological functions as well as a host of specific factors dissected from the reading process itself.

Although this research has provided many insights into the problems of individuals experiencing difficulties in reading, the manner in which it has been assimilated into the reading program requires careful examination and study. Rather than contributing to the improvement of instruction in reading, much of this research has been distorted in its application to serve instead as a justification for the ineffectiveness of some of the instructional patterns and procedures. Despite efforts to describe reading disabilities as a complex of many factors, many highly specific and fragmentary research findings have been extracted from the context of experimental designs and blended together to form a kind of

philosophy of reading from which many generalizations have been drawn that imply relationships of questionable validity. This "philosophy of reading" seeks to attribute the lack of success in reading by an individual to a specific causative factor, and rejects the possibility of an ineffective learning experience. The instructional program has emerged as a constant factor in the search to determine the cause of difficulties.

The demonstrated ability of some or even the majority to profit from instruction has served to justify its effectiveness while those who do not make progress are placed into the convenient categories borrowed from the research. The concerned parent is over-indulgent, while many of the others qualify for the equally negative effects of neglect or apathy. The loss of a pet, a serious case of measles, or the presence of a grandparent living in the home has become sufficient evidence to define anxiety, the lack of security, or perhaps the common favorite, the all-inclusive "emotional block." There are comparable classifications that have been developed from the studies of reading and intelligence. The "slow learner" classification has been used to explain the lack of progress even though the evidence is generally derived from intelligence tests requiring reading skills.

There is no intent to minimize the importance of this research, but rather to question the superficiality of the diagnoses that result in a clinical categorization of children, and the effects that these practices have upon the instructional program. The ample clinical terminology now makes it possible for every single child in our classrooms to qualify for one or more of the classifications that have been developed to explain difficulties in reading. There is a need for something

better than an outlook that tends to focus the causes for difficulties beyond the ability of the school and the teacher to cope with them, and results in a program of instruction that tends to exclude many individuals. Through periods of kindness and tolerance, watchful and hopeful waiting, and concentrated remedial activity, there has been a great deal of understanding, but often little instruction that might contribute to a higher level of proficiency for the individual. The attempts of many schools to deal with the problems of children have often been inconsistent with what we know about them and how they learn.

The need for research to provide the data for the development of a positive program of reading instruction has been dramatically demonstrated by the interest stimulated by many of the critics who, nevertheless, have made definite and positive proposals for reading instruction. Although the present programs of instruction may be doing an adequate job, there is no need to be unconditionally committed to them in our efforts to defend their effectiveness.

Research for Teaching and Learning

The need for research that will have a direct effect upon the learning experiences of children within the classroom is demonstrated by the existing gap between theory and practice. There is widespread intellectual acceptance of the theoretical instructional patterns that are well founded in the theories of learning, but there is also the reluctance that comes when teachers are faced with problems of "How to do it?" and "How effective is it?"

There is logic in the proposals for extending the range of reading abilities within the classroom, yet the tasks of organization, materials and teacher time

encourage a more systematic group approach. There are well expressed objectives for reading that go beyond the acquisition of skills, but little evidence that a more integrated program will also achieve the same goals that have become a part of the graded system of our schools. Within the content areas, we are concerned that all teachers be teachers of reading, but the instructional patterns for the development of a technical vocabulary, for the organization of experiences to provide differentiated materials and individualized instruction have failed to gain popular acceptance in the schools. The resulting uncertainties further contribute to the confusions and inconsistencies in the reading program as teachers are faced with the soundness of theories and the persuasiveness of their exponents with little research data to justify and to demonstrate the nature of change. Research then must not only provide the data for the support or the rejection of the theories that govern the instructional organization of our schools, but must further translate these findings into meaningful programs of action for teachers who bear the responsibility for the learning experiences of children and for the interpretation of them to parent and community groups.

Research in Growth and Development

A third area that requires the data of research in the development of a more effective instructional program in reading is suggested by the increasing fund of information concerning the growth and development of children. Recent studies provide many hypotheses that can be significant in the consideration of the

materials of instruction, the appropriateness of learning experiences, and the means of organizing for learning. Studies in motivation, interest, developmental tasks, language development and other areas of growth provide a framework for reading research that can make an important contribution to the daily classroom activities of children and to the long range purposes of the instructional program. The discussion by Russell of the characteristics of various age groups and the possible implications for the reading program develops a relationship that could be extended to alter the tentative nature of the implications for instruction.¹

Reading research related to the studies of child growth and development can contribute to the effectiveness of instruction through the identification and the reduction of the inconsistencies of reading programs with the data about children that is available to us.

A research emphasis that is defined in terms of instructional improvement cannot remain the province of the research laboratories of the university campuses. This is a research responsibility that cannot be delegated nor assumed by the psychologist or sociologist. It is research function that requires the active participation of all persons directly concerned with the teaching of children, and the willingness of the elementary and secondary schools to undertake a greater role in the organization and development of research studies.

¹ David H. Russell, "Reading and Child Development." *Reading in the Elementary School*. Forty-Eighth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1949. p. 10-32.

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