

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE TEACHING OF READING?

THEODORE CLYMER

RESEARCH in reading over the past fifty years has revealed a great deal, but in terms of the importance and immensity of the job, we have made just a beginning. In the space of this editorial only selected ideas about our state of knowledge in reading can be developed. The ideas which have been selected are judged by the author to be of the greatest importance to the classroom teacher.

The Teacher Is Important

One of the reasons that methods research in the teaching of reading has been relatively unsuccessful in providing viable answers is that teacher influence has been neglected in the research design. Characteristically we find in research studies that there are greater differences among classrooms than among the methods being tested. While a number of factors might explain this phenomenon, the teacher seems clearly to be the most important element.

Part of the teacher impact may come through a particular "style of teaching." It seems likely, also, that a great deal is dependent on the teacher's ability to relate to the children being taught. We do not expect the principles of learning to vary from classroom to classroom, but the important personal element in applying these principles cannot be neglected in judging the effectiveness of a program.

Variability Is Inescapable

The history of reading methods could be organized around a theme of attempts to eliminate variability among pupils. Thoughtful educators recognize that variability is inescapable when curriculum goals are limitless. Indeed, the only way to keep youngsters alike is not to teach them anything—for the minute we begin to teach, the capable will learn a great deal and the less capable will learn but somewhat less. The net result then from our instructional program is greater variability at the end of the instructional period than at the beginning.

Programs in reading which are successful are those which recognize that variability exists and that variability will increase through the grade levels. Good programs are designed to accommodate children of different levels of ability at

the same age or grade level. Hopefully, educators have abandoned their search for a magic technique, formula or set of materials which will enable all children to reach an arbitrary standard. A thoughtful examination of the research shows clearly that variability is inevitable and that the good program makes provisions for this variability.

Reading Growth Is One Part of Language Development

While studies for some years have demonstrated the interrelationships among the language arts, it has been only recently that the need to look at total language development has become widely accepted. In the early years of reading instruction, it is impossible to separate the teaching of reading, language, spelling and composition.

Increasingly it is recognized that development of skill in any one of these areas serves to reinforce and extend the skills in the other areas. This increasing recognition of the interrelationship among the language arts explains in part the recent interest in programs for early reading instruction which are called "language arts" or "language experience" approaches.

Planned Instruction Produces Superior Results

Throughout the history of reading instruction in the United States there has been a constant concern with the problem of providing a direct planned program of instruction which at the same time provides for more indirect and spontaneous instruction. The achievement of children in a planned program seems clearly superior to that of children taught by an incidental or spontaneous program.

Unfortunately, some direct and planned programs become so inflexible that children, while developing reading skills, lose their taste for reading. The problem here is to develop an approach which provides a structure and a sequence and, at the same time, utilizes the opportunities that arise incidentally and one which also capitalizes on the interests of children. Such an approach obviously requires a sensitive and well prepared teacher who can determine instructional needs and who reacts sympathetically to children's interests and special problems.

Independent Application Is Essential

Reading programs which confine children to a set of experiences from textbooks cannot develop fully independent readers. While instruction with a planned program may be necessary to provide instruction in skills, the text can never provide sufficient practice to develop fully independent and efficient readers. Such reading comes only from a variety of experiences in which the child makes independent application of his growing skills.

The reading program which is confined to a set of instructional materials alone is a dull program, but, in addition, such a program robs the child of true independence in reading skills. The need for classroom collections and a profes-

sionally staffed central library for all pupils, elementary as well as secondary, is clearly dictated by this information.

There Are No Simple Answers

One clear finding from the research literature is the complexity of reading growth and the enormous number of factors which influence the full development of reading skills. If this understanding is applied to instructional programs, it can be clearly seen that simple solutions—for example, the use of a set of particular diagnostic exercises, a change in art work in the basal programs, or a library in which the children are free to read what their interests and ability dictates—will not be enough to provide an effective program.

A program which is truly effective must be broad in scope, must meet a range of ability levels and interest levels, must provide a structured and planned program, must carry the child to independent application and must take into account differences in background and rate of learning. These necessary characteristics, combined with the complexity of the human individual, clearly negate any simple program or simple solution for improving the teaching of reading.

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