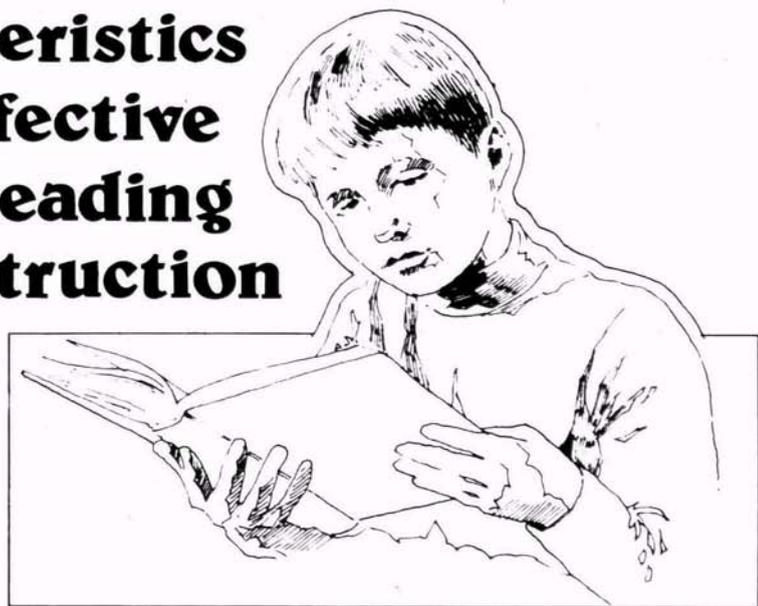


Characteristics of Effective Reading Instruction



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All the answers are not yet in, but research is beginning to tell what works in the teaching of reading.

Some say we do not know what makes an effective teacher of reading, but this may overstate the case. Admittedly, research on reading teachers has been sparse compared to the many attempts to identify the general characteristics of successful teachers. Without a doubt, several methodological, statistical, and instrumentation problems also impede progress toward finding consistent results on the teacher variable. Nevertheless, teachers of reading cannot wait for unequivocal research findings—the reading problems are at hand now in many elementary classrooms. Although definite information is not in hand, we must be encouraged by our knowledge of some characteristics that have been pinpointed as associated with reading teacher effectiveness. Indeed, some of this information has been around for a long time.

Many so-called “new ideas” in reading instruction were put forth by Arthur Gates in the 1930s and 1940s. During the 1930s, there was strong support for the viewpoint that a mental age of 6.5 years was required for success in beginning reading. Gates conducted research (1937) aimed at determining the effect of the teacher on the child’s success in reading. Earlier, it had been thought that reading success depended only on a child’s mental age. In essence Gates found that, while the mental age of students is correlated with success in reading, of equal importance is the type of teaching, the effectiveness, and the expertise of the teacher. Gates further pointed out the importance of (a) availability and good use of materials, and (b) characteristics of individual reading programs. The significance of Gates’ finding that a mental age of 6.5 was not required for success in

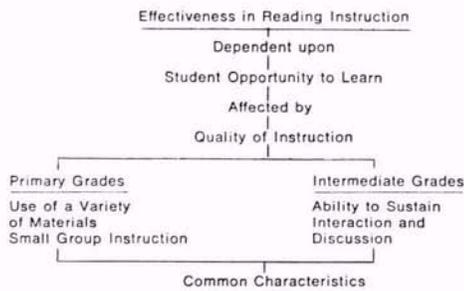
beginning reading was to turn attention away from characteristics of the child, and toward the quality and type of instruction.

Although almost 50 years have passed since Gates conducted his research, teacher effectiveness research in reading is still in its infancy. However, there have been some productive beginnings. One emphasis defines effective reading instruction in relation to different groups of pupils, at different grade levels, and at different cognitive levels of achievement. The Beginning Teacher Evaluation Study, conducted by the California Commission for Teacher Preparation and Licensing and funded by the National Institute of Education (McDonald, 1976), holds promise for extending knowledge on the teaching of reading. While preliminary results have to be treated with caution, the most significant general conclusion is that teachers do make a difference in the learning situation. Two other significant conclusions from these data are that "a pattern of teaching practices is more likely to be related to learning than a single practice and, second, effective teaching patterns will differ by subject matter and by grade level" (McDonald, 1976, p. 21). In looking at second-grade reading, a pattern of instruction that allows teachers to be accessible to pupils for instruction, work in small groups, and use a variety of materials was most effective. In fifth-grade reading, teacher practices that sustained interaction about ideas were most effective.

In addition to investigating the effect of the teacher on students' reading achievement, another important variable has received increased attention in research investigations published since the early 1970s. Rosenshine points out (1977) that increased focus on the student variable, such as content covered and student attention to important instructional activities, appears to be clearly related to student achievement gains, particularly in the areas of reading. The three major variables related to the student are academic engaged time, content covered, and provisions for direct instruction. Neither of these variables appears to be mutually exclusive, nor are any of these variables independent of the role of the teacher in a reading instructional setting.

"Academic engaged time," which is the time that students interact with pertinent academic

Figure 1: Instructional Variables Associated With Effective Teaching of Reading*



- Diagnosis of student reading levels
- Placement of student in proper level for instruction
- Development of individual prescription for students
- Teacher knowledge and preparation time for a lesson
- Lesson presentation geared to student level
- Development of effective record-keeping system
- Proper use of materials for instruction
- Development of ongoing diagnostic techniques
- Maximum time for contact with students
- Balanced instructional and independent reading program
- Well established purposes for learning
- Opportunities for application of skills learned
- Balanced instructional and independent reading activities
- Systematic and meaningful development of reading skills

*From: William H. Rupley and Timothy R. Blair. *Diagnostic and Remedial Reading Instruction: A Primer for Classroom and Clinic*. Skokie, Illinois: Rand McNally Publishing Company, 1979.

materials at a moderate difficulty level (Berliner *et al*, 1976), logically is under the direct supervision of the teacher. In the area of reading instruction, several research investigations have found that teachers who employ ongoing diagnosis of students' reading development coupled with instruction adapted to the diagnostic findings had higher achieving pupils in reading. (Averch *et al*, 1971; Blair, 1975; Rupley, 1976.)

The effect of content covered on students' level of reading achievement is a "common sense" factor associated with the level of students' reading achievement. Simply stated, students cannot be expected to do well in an area of reading for which they have not had direct instruction or opportunity to learn. The role of the teacher is obvious. The equation is a simple one. If a student's reading achievement is measured by performance on a task or skill that has not been taught, then that student will not do well. Conversely, achievement scores will be higher when teachers have emphasized tested tasks and skills.

Another variable, "provisions for direct instruction," includes (a) activities that relate di-

rectly to making academic progress, and (b) an instructional setting that promotes such activities. In reading instruction, some of the instructional guidelines based on recent research findings (Rupley, 1977; Rupley and Blair, 1978) seem to indicate a body of common characteristics. The major characteristics include a structured reading program, the development of purposeful reading, systematic and meaningful development of reading skills, and the establishment of reading goals and objectives that relate to observable learner outcomes.

Teacher characteristics and student variables go together to constitute a reading instructional program. What the teacher does in reading instruction should have a direct effect on what the student does, and the learners' reading achievement should be directly influenced by the teacher's instruction. As suggested earlier, neither area can be dealt with separately. An exclusive emphasis on one or the other of these two dimensions jeopardizes the effectiveness of the reading program. At this point it seems that what "works" in reading instruction can be summarized as follows:

It is apparent in the information presented in Figure 1 that each of the variables is concerned primarily with instruction that is within the domain of direct teacher influence. Implementation of these instructional variables in a reading program will vary in terms of the teacher's expertise and the children with whom he/she is working. For example, what is viewed by one teacher as a structured reading program that includes systematic and meaningful development of skills may be viewed by another as a loosely structured program. Furthermore, children's home background, language development, peer pressure, and a multitude of other factors can directly influence their reading progress. It is likely that the interaction of the teacher's instruction with what the child brings to the reading setting determines reading achievement.

All the answers are not yet in hand. But even in the absence of complete information, teachers can take advantage of what is known about effective reading instruction. What we know about effective reading instruction can never have a national impact in elementary classrooms until such information is shared with

teachers. To say that "we don't know what makes an effective reading teacher" serves no real purpose. What needs to be said is: "We do know some things about effective teaching of reading. Not everything, mind you, but some things. Let us begin with what we *do* know in anticipation of even more complete understandings as research in this area goes forward." \square

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