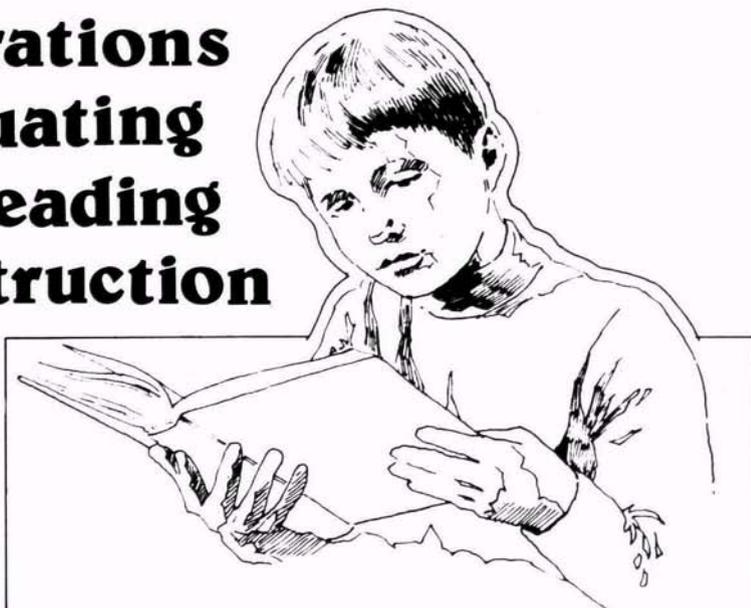


Considerations for Evaluating Reading Instruction



Michael C. Strange

We have learned enough about teaching reading to be able to list some elements of a sound program.

As in many human enterprises, learning more about something sometimes leads to more questions than it does answers. Reading instruction has the same characteristic. While this may be expected, it tends to create a lot of anxiety for professionals charged with teaching young children to read. The state of the art of reading instruction is not as advanced as we would like to ensure that every child has the right to read. It is, however, sufficiently developed to evaluate attempts to reach that goal. What follows is a description of elements that most reading experts would endorse as part of a sound instructional program in reading. The degree of congruence between the ideal and the real can provide a basis for evaluating reading instruction.

Individualization

The notion that children learn at different rates and in different ways is so well accepted in

education as to be almost a cliché. While the specifics of individualized programs are still debated, the debate concerns form, not the substance of the assumption. Basically, individualizing is providing instruction that children need and are ready for at a pace that is appropriate for them (Durkin, 1974). Individualization does not demand a tutorial program, although for some children at some time this may be necessary. Individualized instruction does not mean teaching individually. For the most part, grouping is a highly visible organizational pattern in individualized programs. The groups, however, are formed for specific purposes and short durations. Children who have similar needs or interests are brought together for instruction. When the goals are met, the group is disbanded and the children re-assigned. When individual needs are met through group instruction, individualization is a concept more useful in the planning than in the delivery of instruction.

Diagnostic

Diagnosis for the purpose of determining needed instruction should be an essential part of any reading program. In most cases analysis of oral reading errors will provide sufficient information to initiate instruction. The difficulty is that most teachers see diagnosis as a rather formal enterprise and as a result, limit the amount of data collected. Children are marvelously unreliable, and unless multiple samples are taken, we will inevitably make poor decisions about needed instruction. Also the material the child is reading can have a tremendous effect on a child's responses (Pearson & Studt, 1975; Allington and Strange, 1977). Diagnosis is a tricky business, and the only chance to get reliable data is to get a lot of data. Anytime that the child is reading is an opportunity to collect information, and ought to be used as such. In any child's file there ought to be many samples of the child's reading performance.

Prescriptive

All children have the right to expect that their teacher will spend time considering their needs. All teachers have an obligation to be able to explain why they are teaching a particular child a particular thing. The prescription or plan should be written so that a child's growth can be evaluated, and the teacher can evaluate his or her own performance.

Placement

There is probably nothing more frustrating to a child trying to learn to read than to be placed in materials that are too difficult. Betts (1946) has provided guidelines based on a child's oral reading errors that allow teachers to appropriately place children for instruction. While his criteria for determining instructional level (95 percent word recognition, 75 percent comprehension) have been seriously questioned (Goodman, 1969), they are still eminently useful when teachers bear in mind that the task in reading is not 100 percent word recognition, but the extraction of meaning. To this end, a teacher's understanding of the concept of miscues (Goodman, 1967) is helpful. However, even without the concept of miscue,

strict adherence to Bett's criteria will result in children being placed in material closer to their independent than to their instructional level. This is preferable to their being placed in material which is too difficult. That a child's ability is underestimated will become obvious as multiple oral reading samples are collected.

Isolated Skills

The idea of reading skills is pedagogically attractive to many. There is, however, a danger in an overreliance on skill activities to teach reading. To paraphrase an old adage, reading is more than the sum of its skills. Far too many children spend far too much time drilling on isolated skills. Teachers are often mystified by children who can correctly complete skill sheets, but then can't apply those skills in actual reading. Pearson (1976) suggests that the leap from isolated skill instruction to actual reading may be too great for many children to make. He suggests an intermediate step of skills in context in which children are required to practice the target skill with the semantic and syntactic cues that are available when reading.

Basal Readers

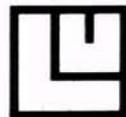
There is a strange love-hate relationship in reading between practitioners and basal readers. The nature of the conflict seems based not so much on the concept of basal readers as on their use or, more appropriately, misuse. Basals form the core of the vast majority of instructional reading programs in the United States (Spache and Spache, 1973; Smith and Johnson, 1976) and thus have a tremendous influence on how children are taught to read.

Basals have been criticized for many reasons, such as dull content, sexism, racism, and so on. These problems are, for the most part, correctable, and publishers have taken the responsibility for doing so. A significant problem with basals is not under the influence of the publishers, however. Teachers feel a tremendous responsibility to teach children to read, and at the same time find themselves at a loss about the best way to accomplish this goal. The basal series, with an impressive list of reading experts as authors, provides a sense of false security. The experts say do it

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like this so it must be right. The basal is a resource and slavish adherence to its plan, scope, sequence, and so on is poor practice. Teachers need to modify the basal program based on their professional judgment and the needs of their students.

Reading

Allington (1977) says it best, if somewhat clumsily: "If they don't read much, how they ever gonna get good." It seems strange that we need to be concerned that children may not be allowed to read during reading lessons. This, however, seems to be the case. Children spend an inordinate amount of time practicing the "skills" of reading without being allowed sufficient time to apply those skills. There appears to be an attitude that if children are not busily scratching away at paper with a pointed stick they are not learning. Every reading lesson ought to include a substantial period of time during which children are allowed to read a book. The purpose of the reading is for unstructured practice of the reading skills that they are acquiring, not to answer

questions, write a report, share the story, or anything else.

I now find myself in a terrible dilemma. In some classrooms the only time during reading lessons that children read continuous discourse is in the oral reading circle. This is perhaps the most widely condemned activity in reading. If, however, it is the only time children are allowed to read, it has some merit. If nothing else it provides practice in straight up sitting, quick discovering of place, and open-eyed napping. A minor modification would result in a much better practice, silent reading circles.

Management

Every reading program needs some type of management component. Management can take many different forms. These may be anecdotal records, teacher-devised checklists, commercially available skills management systems, and so on. The purpose of a management system is to help teachers keep track of what their students have learned and what they still need to learn. In all too many classrooms, management depends on the basal reader. If this is Tuesday, it must be blends. It is certainly possible to devise a management system with a basal reader as its core. Many school districts have found this to be a desirable approach since it results in a management system that is specific to the series they are using.

Teaching

There are cases in the literature of children who seem to have learned to read without any apparent instruction. Most children, however, learn to read as the result of teachers' efforts. Many children learn to read with minimum teacher effort, but significant numbers of children need considerable teaching. One of the unfortunate outcomes of individualized, diagnostic, and prescriptive instruction is a decrease in the amount of direct teacher instruction. Much of the time that was once spent in contact with children now seems to be spent writing prescriptions, negotiating contracts, and building learning centers. Children are often expected to teach themselves through interaction with dittoed materials. As Duffy and Sherman (1972) point out, this is testing, not teaching.

Teaching children to read is still a difficult and confusing endeavor. Much of it depends on sound professional judgment and hunches. We have, however, come a long way from the syllabariums and hornbooks. Our lack of complete answers should not be an excuse for allowing poor practice to continue. [E]

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