

The Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois has been charged by NIE with the task of improving reading comprehension instruction in the elementary school. To learn what it is like now, three successive days were spent in each of 39 classrooms in 14 school systems when reading and social studies were taught. All together, 17,997 minutes were spent in the classrooms.<sup>1</sup>

### Comprehension Instruction

The data about teaching comprehension are easy to report because they are almost nonexistent. Comprehension instruction did not occur during social studies and it took up only 45 minutes (out of a possible 11,587 minutes) during reading periods. The average length of each of the 12 reported instances was 3.75 minutes.

These findings were totally unexpected, not only because of the importance of comprehension but also because the study was designed specifically so that the teaching of comprehension would be likely to be observed. For instance:

1. Grades three to six were selected on the assumption that more comprehension instruction is offered there than in the primary grades.

2. Requests were made to see the best teachers on the assumption that they teach for comprehension more than other faculty members.

3. Social studies as well as reading was observed on the assumption that the difficulty of social studies textbooks makes teaching for comprehension mandatory.

Since comprehension instruction was rarely seen, what was?

### Mentioning

Based on the observations, "mentioning" has supplanted instruction in grades three through six. (Mentioning is saying just enough about a topic to allow for an assignment related to it.) This became apparent in the very first classroom. Specifically, a fourth-grade teacher spent one minute on contractions, then suddenly, with no explanation, switched for two minutes to the

*Dolores Durkin is Professor of Education, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.*

# SCHOOLS DON'T TEACH COMPREHENSION

Classroom observation of reading and social studies instruction shows that teachers are mentioners, assignment-givers, and interrogators.



sounds of three digraphs. The explanation soon became clear in the form of two workbook assignments, one dealing with contractions, the other with digraphs.

The most blatant example of mentioning occurred in a third grade. In 22 minutes—again this preceded workbook and ditto-sheet assignments—the teacher covered in the following order: syllabication, sounds for *ea*, limericks, new vocabulary, homographs, syllabication, and the suffix *teen*. At no time were the children told why they were studying these topics nor was anything done to show how they related to reading.

The importance of worksheets showed up in still other ways. In one

fourth grade, for example, the teacher skimmed a number of topics, the last of which was prefixes. Although the children seemed puzzled, the teacher never explained what had been said but advised instead, "Do this first," referring to the prefix ditto sheet, "while they're still fresh in your mind."

In another third grade, the teacher worked with seven children. Since they were fairly slow, the attention given to new vocabulary and to raising questions about the story that was to be read seemed appropriate. What was puzzling, however, was how quickly everything was done. Soon, an explanation for the haste was heard. "Let's get busy now," warned



the teacher. "You have to finish three sheets by ten o'clock."

In this case, not all the children were able to do the worksheets; for some, "mentioning" was insufficient. This explained why the observed teachers often spent time helping students do assignments. Unfortunately, the focus of the help was on getting right answers rather than on the pedagogical concern of whether what was being done was understood. Another question, of course, should have been asked about the exercises themselves: Do they have any relevance for reading? It seemed that covering material was more important than teaching children—or teaching reading.<sup>2</sup>

### Comprehension Assessment

Even though the observed teachers rarely taught children how to comprehend, they spent considerable time assessing the children's ability to do just that. Teachers' questions about what had been read took up 12.1 percent of the time spent on reading.

It should be noted, too, that children often weren't queried about a selection until several days after they had read it. With the delay, it was impossible to ascertain whether the questions assessed the ability to comprehend or the ability to recall what had been comprehended earlier. Although the two are related, they are also different. Failure to distinguish between the two might lead to a misdiagnosis of problems.

As it happened, evidence of interest in diagnosis was not apparent during the observations. Ditto sheets, for instance, were not used to remedy problems or provide challenge. Instead, what was observed pointed to indiscriminant use that resulted in much busy work.

### Social Studies

What was observed during the reading periods characterized teachers as mentioners, assignment-givers, and interrogators. What did the observations of social studies reveal?

Essentially, teachers depended on commercially-prepared materials in social studies, too. And, equally apparent were children who could not read the social studies textbook. To cope with this problem, and, at the same time cover the content, teachers commonly relied on "round robin" reading. The better students read the text aloud while, supposedly, the

poorer ones followed along. Even though able students did the oral reading, it was often ineffective. They stumbled over hard-to-pronounce words, read in a monotone, and were difficult to hear.

At least some of the oral reading might have been improved if the teachers had previewed the content of the chapter and gone over the more difficult vocabulary. Surprisingly, such preparation was rare. Less than 1 percent of social studies time was spent on preparation for reading.

Although no time during social studies went to comprehension instruction, 450 minutes went to comprehension assessment in the form of question-asking. These questions pointed up the large amount of time spent on content far removed from the lives or likely interests of children.

As with reading, written assignments were frequent during social studies. Not surprisingly, the children who were unable to read the textbook found it difficult to read assignment sheets. Almost 14 percent of the teachers' time went to helping with assignments. Here, again, the great concern seemed to be with right answers.

Although it had been assumed, prior to the observations, that social studies is a time for emphasizing study skills (outlining, paraphrasing encyclopedia articles, varying rate of reading to suit purpose), the data did not support this. Study skills instruction added up to only 59 minutes.

### Thoughts for Instructional Leaders

If the research findings reported here come close to providing an accurate picture, grades three through six do not provide environments that foster *real* reading. Instead, workbooks and ditto sheets run the program, and children are encouraged to conclude that reading is doing exercises.

If you feel that your school is different, let me suggest the following. At the end of a randomly selected day, ask your teachers to fill out a form that asks: What did you do during the reading period, and why did you do it? You can be satisfied if typical answers are something like: I taught expressions that signal the passing of time (the *next* day, *after* dinner), then had the children skim a story to find other examples, because they have difficulty following a

sequence of events. On the other hand, changes are called for if the responses are something like: The children read pages 27-43 in their readers, then filled out pages four to six in their workbooks, because those are the pages that came next.

Unfortunately, changing teachers from distributors of materials to dispensers of instruction is increasingly difficult due to the special importance now given test scores. Two illustrations bear this out. The first is one teacher's response after I described one of the classrooms in my research:

Third-graders worked on topic sentences on commercially-prepared worksheets. The children read the paragraphs silently, then took turns reading topic sentences aloud. This worked well because the materials were written to ensure that topic sentences existed and could be found. Next, the teacher shifted the focus to library books. This part of the plan was short-lived, however, for it was quickly apparent that real world materials don't have topic sentences. Instead of discussing this dilemma with the children, the teacher terminated the activity.

Following my talk, one teacher in the audience said, "I agree with you about topic sentences. I know how contrived those worksheets are. However, I feel I *must* use them because the reading test that my school gives in the spring has exercises just like those on the worksheets; and, in my school, how children do on tests is very important."

This teacher's forthright response brought to mind still another classroom in the research, a sixth grade. When the teacher directed a group to work with the *SRA Reading Laboratory* materials, the response was a spontaneous, loud groan. When I asked the teacher whether a groan was the usual response, she admitted that it was but said that she used the SRA materials anyway because the one year she put them away, "test scores fell."

Somehow, this reminds me of the tail wagging the dog. ■

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed report, see Dolores Durkin, "What Classroom Observations Reveal About Reading Comprehension Instruction," *Reading Research Quarterly* 14 (1978-79): 481-533.

<sup>2</sup> You may be assuming that instruction with comprehension was slighted because time went to other kinds of reading instruction. Let me point out that only 178.2 minutes (1.5 percent of the total time) went to instruction in phonics, structural analysis, word meanings, and study skills.

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