Reading

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How Should Poor Readers Be Taught?
Poor readers are again the focus of conversation and concern as educators respond to reports suggesting a common curriculum for all students and to research claiming that poor readers are given qualitatively different instruction than that given to good readers. This research suggests that:

1. Poor readers are often given material that is relatively harder for them than the material good readers are given. (2) Poor readers spend more instructional time on isolated words and phonics and less time on contextual reading. (3) Poor readers read more orally and less silently than good readers. (4) Teachers correct more errors made by poor readers, usually without giving them time to self-correct. With good readers, teachers ignore most errors that don't affect meaning and, when they do correct, tend to allow time to finish the sentence so that any meaning change is evident to the reader. (5) Little attention is directed to meaning or storyline in poor reader groups.

The call for a common curriculum and the research showing that poor readers get qualitatively different reading instruction have led some educators to suggest that all students be placed in the grade-level book, regardless of ability. We tried this. We placed all children in the same book and gave them all the same instruction. Some learned and some didn't. To help those who were failing we gave differential instruction, but we weren't sure what to change for which children.

Currently, we are developing a science of reading education. We know, for example, that just as all plants need sun and water, all children need both a decoding and a meaning emphasis in their reading instruction. We know that all children should learn to read silently and that they can't learn this if all their instruction emphasizes oral reading. We also know that good readers are placed in books easier for them than the books poor readers are placed in, and that readers grow when placed in material they can read. It is now our task to develop a curriculum for poor readers that will ensure that they get the right amounts of all the essential elements they need to grow as readers.


The Principalship

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What is a Principals' Center?
If principals have such extraordinary influence over the quality and character of their schools, then there is good reason to support them in developing their many abilities. Like other professional inservice programs, principals' centers seek to do just that. As we talk with visitors from other centers we are struck by both their strength of common characteristics and by their immense diversity. While there is no orthodoxy, no "model" of a principals' center, there does seem to be a loose constellation of assumptions on which many centers rest. Most people would probably agree that:

- The principal or headmaster is a central variable in determining the quality of a school.
- It is possible for most school heads to be effective educational leaders as well as building managers.
- The role of the principal, the nature of the job, and the context of the school are all changing rapidly, becoming more complex and problematic.

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Principals need opportunities to learn and grow.
Principals have the capacity and need for personal and professional growth—as much after they have assumed their position as before.
Principals are as capable of lifelong learning as other professionals.
All of the conditions necessary for principals' learning and growth exist: problems, a context, and someone who wants the problems addressed.
The major element missing is the existence of a sympathetic, nonpunitive, nonjudgmental, helpful resource and support system.
A principals' center can mediate among principals, help without judging or condemning, and assist principals in acquiring, strengthening, and sharing their school leadership skills.
The Harvard Principals' Center began in 1981. As we have attempted to take seriously these assumptions and act on them, we have learned a great deal about the possibilities of a principals' center. The many and creative ways that other centers have developed suggest that with perseverance, enthusiasm, time, and a willingness to think beyond traditional boundaries, many models can be successful.
Some centers have evolved through affiliation with state departments of education, such as the Florida Academy for School Leaders and the West Virginia Principals' Academy. Others cooperate with business groups, such as Delaware's Principals' Center. Others are affiliated with universities such as Harvard, C. W. Post, the University of Texas, Austin, and still others are associated with a state principals' association, such as the New Jersey Principals' Center. In Fairfax County, Virginia, a school system has organized a center within its own boundaries. For each group, a principals' center has become, above all, a continuing search for conditions under which principals learn. Centers are finding several conditions that appear to be associated with the professional invigoration of school principals.
Professional Recognition. Of all the needs of public school practitioners, none is more vital than the need for personal and professional recognition from a society that values the product of education more than those who provide it. Honoring principals appears to have as much impact on principals as training principals. In attempting to involve principals as producers as well as receivers of ideas, services, and skills, centers are finding that being helpful to others is a powerful way to generate respect both for oneself and others.
Voluntary Attendance. When the decision about participation is placed squarely on principals' shoulders, those who participate want to participate: activities become refreshingly free of back row cynics and critics. With the choice to attend comes a willingness to learn.
Protected Setting. Many principals prefer a neutral setting for their reflections and conversations, a place away from the school where a secretary will not intrude with a worried look and a message in hand.
Maximum Diversity. The education business seems to thrive as a sorting enterprise that attempts to narrow the range of human characteristics within a group. Centers are more heterogeneous than homogeneous and thereby occupy a unique place in the experience of principals. Participants frequently bring with them an extraordinary variety of ideas and backgrounds from elementary, middle, and high schools, urban, rural, suburban, public, private, and parochial schools. Seated around the same table are often teachers, parents, superintendents, as well as beginning and experienced principals, university students, and faculty members. Expanding the range of participants also expands the pool of possible solutions to common problems.
Principal-Centered Programs. Principals run things all the time, and run them well. There's no reason they can't run their own professional development activities. The Principals' Center, Inc., in New Orleans, for instance, exists "of the principals, by the principals, and for the principals." Principals there have been active in fund-raising and workshop presentations, right down to licking the stamps. Elsewhere, principals offer workshops for colleagues and often serve on program boards. Principals' decisions
about programs have been inventive and enthusiastic. An Array of Formats. Programs take different forms. Centers such as the Maine Principals' Academy focus on a summer institute while networking among principals during the school year; Texas A&M Principals' Center offers an ongoing hot line; the North Carolina Leadership Institute for Principals offers full-day topical workshops; the C.W. Post Principals' Center has organized "collegial circles" of three to five principals who meet on a monthly basis to discuss approaches and techniques to common problems.

Principals, like other learners, have preferred learning styles, different attention spans, interests, and needs. Consequently, activities in different centers vary, such as those led by principals, faculty members, outside consultants; long-term and short-term; small-group, large-group, and individual participation; low-risk, modest-risk, and high-risk activities. Principals can match their styles to different formats, learning about themselves as learners as well as new content and skills.

For further information about principals' centers, free of charge, write Harvard Principals' Center. 336 Gutman Library, Appian Way, Cambridge, MA 02138. Ask for:

The Principals' Centers Exchange, a periodic newsletter of the Principals' Center Network.
National Directory of Principals Centers, a brief description of 40 different activities in 25 states.
Chronicle of the Principals' Center, an account of the beginning of the Harvard Principals' Center.
Newsletter of the Harvard Principals' Center.

References
Barth, Roland S. "A Principals' Center."  Chronicle of the Principals' Center, 2. 1 (May 1981).

Curriculum Abstracts

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Mainstreaming Urban Students Through Environmental Education
School District 19 in Brooklyn, New York, has developed the Nature's Niche program in which emotionally handicapped and nonhandicapped 6th graders learn side-by-side. The program, which works in the "least restrictive environment" of Brooklyn's Gateway National Park, was designed for underachieving children from low socioeconomic backgrounds who lacked motivation to learn. Nature's Niche provides hands-on experience in mathematics and science, and integrates its many projects with the regular school curriculum as it introduces students to animal, plant, and fish environments. It is staffed by a program director, two science staff developers, a resident teacher, and student teachers from area universities.

Teachers and classes are accommodated in ten classes per 20-week term, with each class coming to the center once a week for a two-hour program. Teachers take part in a series of off-site sessions to learn about the program, their roles in it, and to study materials and participate in demonstrations of how they can use the program's instructional modules. Nature's Niche is housed in special rooms and learning centers to facilitate the study of the living world in the most natural way. Students study horticulture by growing plants in planting rooms, learn animal characteristics by raising small mammals and reptiles, and are introduced to varieties of fresh and saltwater life. Students reconstruct the local marshland environment to learn about bird and sea life in the area.

The pairing of emotionally and nonemotionally handicapped youngsters facilitates enthusiastic, collaborative learning and couples the students' achievement with impressive gains in confidence and self-esteem. Nature's