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# IN DEFENSE OF A K-12 READING PERSPECTIVE

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Teaching students to read is a very important goal in the public schools. This objective has been established because professionals believe that "being able to read" facilitates students' chances for future success and happiness. Yet, when definitions of literacy are reviewed and the reading ability of the adult population in the United States is considered, data indicate that millions of Americans are illiterate. It has been very difficult to ascertain the number of illiterates, but various authorities have estimated that anywhere from one to twenty percent of the American adult population is illiterate (Kirsch & Guthrie, 1977). Could it be that the unwritten philosophy and prevailing practice that elementary grades are for learning to read and secondary experiences involve reading to learn is the primary cause of the problem? Are children not learning to read in the early grades and receiving inappropriate instruction in the junior or high school? Or, is the etiology a question of reinforcement or practice? As Early (1973) so poignantly noted: "What goes wrong? Is it we take youngsters from elementary grade schools who are able readers, and allow them to pass through the secondary years without even learning how to use books?" (p. 366). Regardless, it appears that educators must consider the possibility that they have failed to meet the reading needs of America's youth. In order to reverse this downward spiral, the skill of reading must be viewed as a continuing process. Such a supposition would be adopting and implementing a K-12 perspective.

## K-12 Reading Perspective

The basic premise of a K-12 reading perspective is--reading is a continuous, complex, developmental process, requiring the sequential refinement of skills at various levels. As Karlin put it, "...it begins in the primary grades and is pursued through the upper grades as the needs of the student dictates" (p. 21). Early (1964) sought to explain the need for the integration of direct reading instruction and the application of basic reading skills in the content area at all levels by means of cone-shaped spirals overlapping each other. According to this researcher:

This, I say, "is the line of direct instruction in basic reading skills. Here at the base, in the elementary grades, the spiral is tight to represent heavy emphasis. This program of direct instruction tapers off gradually, but it never disappears, as it spirals up and into senior high school and college ... "This line," I continue, "represents only part of the program, the part which becomes less important in high school. The more important phase is the application of reading skills to the learning of content...and other subjects. To visualize the whole meaning of 'teaching reading in secondary school,' we must overlay this spiral with another one that begins narrow in the primary grades and becomes broader as it reaches the upper grades" (p. 35).

Early also proposed that secondary teachers can contribute a lot to a K-12 reading program but they do not have to be reading specialists to assume their responsibilities. Vacca (1981) and others have supported the adoption of a spiral concept for teaching reading.

In essence, a K-12 reading perspective is all encompassing. It would involve the following principles:

1. The K-12 reading perspective coordinates reading with the student's other communicative experiences.
2. The K-12 reading perspective develops a continuous sequential program extending through elementary and secondary.
3. The K-12 reading perspective provides instruction and guidance in the basic reading skills, in content area reading, in study skills, and personal reading.
4. The K-12 reading perspective is a flexible program that is adapted at each level of advancement to the wide variations in pupil attributes, abilities, and reading needs.
5. The K-12 reading perspective provides differentiated instruction to meet the needs of each child keeping attuned to the commonality of needs, abilities, and interests.
6. The K-12 reading perspective perceives reading as a perceptual process rather than a subject.
7. The K-12 reading perspective stresses reading for thinking, understanding, and learning; and endeavors to develop critical skills and flexibility in comprehension.
8. The K-12 reading perspective strives to develop reading maturity.

Dechant and Smith (1977) have an excellent delineation and discussion of these and other principles important to a K-12 concept.

#### The Elementary Component

There can be no question that the elementary component of a K-12 reading perspective is "in place" and provides students with a comprehensive and sequential program of learning. Basal series are available that provide teachers with the varied methods and materials needed to teach reading to the vast majority of

their students (Cheek & Cheek, 1979). Additionally, pedagogical techniques and materials are available to provide supplementary experiences (e.g., Barnell-Loft Specific Skill Builders), to instruct disabled readers (e.g., Distar), and to challenge gifted readers (e.g., SRA Think Labs). Research has been conducted and reported that supports the refinement and development of elementary reading practices. Yes, the elementary component in K-12 is there.

Many factors have contributed to the prosperity of the elementary component. However, pre-service teacher training may be the most important factor. Elementary teachers receive instruction in the theoretical and practical aspects of reading approaches, techniques, and materials. They are trained to diagnose reading problems, abilities, and potentials of students. In addition they learn to utilize group and individualized instructional procedures. All of this culminates in practical or classroom experiences. Elementary teachers are taught to believe that reading is the hub of the curriculum around which all else revolves. This concept involves the theory that reading is a tool which facilitates the acquisition of knowledge.

Teacher attitude is another element which as embellished the success of the elementary component. The grade school teacher believes in the importance of reading instruction. This attitude is demonstrated in the amount of time and effort s/he allocates to the teaching of reading. In fact, at the primary level most teachers are involved in reading instruction in some form or other throughout the entire school day.

The elementary curriculum also enhances and promotes the teaching of reading. The underlying reason is - "teaching reading is the primary mission of the elementary school" (Smith, Otto, & Hansen, 1978, p. 126). In addition, the teacher has opportunities to integrate reading instruction and reinforcement into all elements of the curriculum (e.g., math, social sciences, etc.).

Another indication that the elementary component is in place is the recent findings of the National Assessment on Educational Progress which reported that nine year olds have improved 3.9% in reading since 1971, while seventeen year olds declined slightly in inferential ability (Mickols, 1982). These findings appear to support the premise that the elementary reading component is well established. These data can also be interpreted to imply that the secondary component of the K-12 perspective is not in place. However, one could hypothesize that the elementary component has really fallen short in meeting the rigid test of a good reading program in that "transferability of learnings it provides to content areas" has not occurred (Dechant & Smith, 1977).

#### The Secondary Component

Unfortunately, the regular or special education component in a K-12 perspective is in its infancy (Lindsey, 1983; Palmer, 1978.) Many factors have been advanced to account for this dilemma. It has been suggested that content teachers have been responsible for some of the shortcomings. Roe, Stoodt, and Burns (1978) have enumerated several faulty assumptions these professionals hold that have precluded their participation in the implementation

of a secondary reading program. These assumptions include: (a) teaching reading is separate and distinct from teaching subject matter; (b) teaching reading problems in the secondary school can be solved through remedial work alone; (c) reading specialists or English teachers should be responsible for the teaching of reading; and (d) teaching reading and teaching literature are one and the same. Smith et al. (1978) noted that a contributing factor to these attitudes is the lack of preservice training in reading principles and techniques. It has also been stated that content teachers' attitudes towards teaching reading can be promoted (O'Rourke, 1980). Furthermore, Vacca (1981) has provided an excellent discussion of the role(s) content teachers should assume in reading instruction. He stated that teachers in secondary schools should become "process helpers" and learn what reading entails. They do not have to become "reading teachers."

A second factor contributing to the limited development of junior and high school reading programs is the lack of appropriate and empirically validated methods and materials (cf. Lindsey & Kerlin, 1979). Today, few specialized methods are available to teachers which are applicable and successful for the abilities and ages of these students. With respect to materials, there is a general void of effective "teaching" materials. Those materials that are available are elementary oriented, and not appropriate. Yet, when using available materials teachers should be aware of their unique attributes. According to Cheek & Cheek (1983) the multiplicity of text characteristics that must be considered include: (a) various levels; (b) reading load; (c) technical and specialized vocabulary; (d) application of all reading skills; (e) higher level comprehension and study skills; (f) compact presentation of all information; (g) concept load; (h) different organizational patterns; (i) interrelated skills and concepts among subject areas; and (j) variety of reading sources.

In addition, the reading curriculum at the junior and senior high school levels, if it exists at all, is often isolated from the other curriculum areas. In fact, reading instruction is usually viewed as the responsibility of the remedial teacher(s). It is "often treated as a subject to be moved through in a linear fashion" (Smith et al., 1978, p. 139) which is in contrast to the spiral concept advocated by Early (1973). Junior and high school teachers do not perceive reading as a processing tool to be taught or practiced under a variety of situations.

Finally, the secondary students themselves have contributed to the secondary "reading dilemma." In this context, Vaughan, Estes, and Curtis (1975) noted that "suddenly students are confronted in history...outside the familiar surroundings of basals... and they have only begun to develop the analytical skills which are required in content reading" (p. 1143). Additionally, many pupils have not acquired the necessary word attack skills (Dupuis and Snyder, 1983) and comprehension abilities (Lindsey, 1980).

#### Developing a K-12 Perspective

It should be obvious that teachers who do not advocate a K-12 reading perspective leave the reading process more or less to chance. Problem readers are apt to be termed "lazy," "indiffer-

ent," or, as the authors have heard some students say, "out of it." There is less likelihood that the factors causing the problems will be identified or that the student will be helped to meet the teacher's objectives. Today there appears to be a K-6 reading perspective. It is incumbent on all involved in teaching children to read to develop a K-12 perspective by joining together to design and to integrate a secondary reading component.

The role of the content teacher in this component, mentioned earlier, should be that of a "process helper," not a diagnostician or materials developer. The content teacher would be concerned primarily with teaching content and providing a comprehensive reading program as it affects his/her subject matter. Content instruction should be based on (1) the abilities and interests of pupils, (2) materials and activities feasible for the teacher to arrange, and (3) the domain of study. What is taught should be determined by the appropriate interaction of the students' needs, the teacher's goals, and the curricular demands (Estes and Vaughan, 1978). Dechant & Smith (1977) have stated that in order "to teach content effectively, we must teach reading effectively" (p. 328). Therefore, the secondary reading program should encompass a broad range of reading and study skills specific to the particular content area. Provision should be made for teaching new skills as well as reviewing and reinforcing previously learned abilities. The content teacher needs to envision reading processes from a K-12 perspective.

Research data (e.g., Bond, 1958) show that any increase in reading ability is reflected in an increase in scholastic achievement. Thus, educators need to make every effort to enhance a student's reading ability. It must be noted that though a student is able to read well in the lower grades, it does not guarantee that s/he will be able to transfer those skills to content material effectively. While some skills overlap in the different disciplines, each subject area makes special reading demands on the student. For many students it will be the first time they are analyzing, synthesizing, making predictions, and identifying organizational patterns in specific content—all of which require the assistance of a "process helper." There can be no doubt that the content teacher would be the logical person for this role. Yet, the sole responsibility for developing these reading skills must not fall on the content teacher. Grade school teachers need to accept some responsibility for initiating the integration of reading strategies into the content areas. The teaching of these skills would be continued and refined at the junior and high school levels.

In this context, it may also be stated that all students, at some time or other, need a "process helper." The notion that only problem readers need reading instruction deprives the better student of much needed help. According to Karlin (1977):

It would be erroneous to conclude that poor students and those with reading disabilities are the only ones who could profit from reading assistance. It might surprise teachers to learn that a considerable number of gifted students are weak in specified aspects of reading. (p. 4)

The implication of all of this is that the requirements of students are more likely to be met if all teachers accept some responsibility for teaching reading to all those who can benefit from it.

#### Conclusion

The number of adult illiterates increases instead of decreases each year. One reason that may contribute to this problem is the lack of a K-12 reading perspective in the public school. Teaching reading is an important and integral part of the elementary system. Unfortunately, "teaching reading" in the secondary program has not been pursued. This may be due to an attitude position on the part of content teachers as well as a lack of knowledge about the reading process by teachers within the secondary component. It is imperative that all educators realize that the difference in reading at six and sixty is the refinement of reading skills over the years (Henry, 1974). Elementary, junior, and high school students must be given a chance to refine the reading skills which are established in the elementary component. In order to provide these students with this opportunity a joint effort must be made to design and implement a K-12 reading program.

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