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Effects of a Secondary Reading Methods Course on Students' Attitudes toward Teaching Content Reading

Bruce A. Lloyd

It takes a lifetime for individuals to master the reading process, and high school teachers play an important role. Moreover, high school teachers, who are subject matter specialists, are the best persons to teach students the reading skills unique to the various content areas (Shepherd, 1984). Many secondary teachers are aware of this opportunity and responsibility; others are not, so efforts are underway to help them *all* believe in the need for teaching reading skills in their special subjects (Lloyd, 1986; Roe, Stoodt and Burns, 1987). Activities such as inservice workshops and formal courses in reading are valuable for practicing teachers because these experiences do change high school teachers' attitudes about the need for teaching reading skills (O'Rourke, 1980; Stieglitz, 1983; Patberg, Dewitz and Henning, 1984).

But what about the preservice educator? The teacher-in-training now is usually required to take at least one undergraduate reading methods course for certification. The rationale is that such a course will help preservice educators become aware of the need for teaching reading skills. Will it? Welle (1981) says "yes." She reports using the Vaughan Scale (1977) to measure preservice teachers' opinions about the value of her reading methods courses. Over a three year period her students expressed positive views about the need

for teaching reading skills. Christiansen (1986), using his own questionnaire, reports positive results from his research. His students were in favor of the reading course requirement and thought themselves to be well prepared to teach reading skills to their students.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the impact of a required secondary reading methods course on pre-service teachers' attitudes regarding the need to teach reading skills to high school students, using an objective measure to assess attitude change during the course. The duration of the study was for one academic year (two semesters) and utilized six class sections (three each semester). The data gathering instrument was "A Scale to Measure Attitudes Toward Teaching Reading in Content Classrooms" (Vaughan, 1977), whose author specified that it might be used without violation of copyright by anyone seeking to "alleviate the problems of secondary readers" (p. 608). Scoring was done using a 10-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

At the beginning of each semester, on the first day of class before the course outline was distributed, all students were given a copy of the Vaughan Scale and told to fill it out anonymously. These papers were collected and coded by course meeting day and time, the responses were quantified, and means and standard deviations were computed for each item. This process was repeated on the last day of class at the end of the semester. The significance of the differences between means (pre/post survey) was calculated for each of the six classes, then for the three fall classes as a group and the three winter classes as a group. Finally, all groups were combined and the results examined for pre/post survey test significance. These data are reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1			
Pre-test and post-test means, and significance of differences between means for all groups attitudes' about the need to teach reading skills to high school students (Vaughan Scale)			
	MEANS		Significance
	pre N=182	post N=171	of Difference
1. A content area teacher is obliged to help students improve their reading ability.	7.59	8.91	.000**
2. Technical vocabulary should be introduced to students in content classes before they meet those terms in a reading passage.	7.40	9.24	.000**
3. The primary responsibility of a content teacher should be to impart subject matter knowledge.	6.94	7.42	.060
4. Few students can learn all they need to know about how to read in six years of schooling.	5.90	7.52	.000**
5. The sole responsibility for teaching students how to study should lie with reading teachers.	2.56	1.65	.001**
6. Knowing how to teach reading in content areas should be required for secondary teaching certification.	7.02	8.02	.000**
7. Only English teachers should be responsible for teaching reading in secondary schools.	2.67	1.52	.000**
8. A teacher who wants to improve students' interest in reading should show them that he or she likes to read.	7.54	8.35	.000**
9. Content teachers should teach content and leave reading instruction to reading teachers.	2.95	1.57	.000**
10. A content area teacher should be responsible for helping students think on an interpretive level as well as a literal level when they read.	8.18	9.09	.000**
11. Content area teachers should feel a greater responsibility to the content they teach than to any reading instruction they may be able to provide.	5.78	5.49	.323
12. Content area teachers should help students learn to set purposes for reading.	7.34	8.73	.000**
13. Every content area teacher should teach students how to read material in his or her content specialty.	7.32	9.02	.000**
14. Reading instruction in secondary schools is a waste of time.	0.82	0.57	.127
15. Content area teachers should be familiar with theoretical concepts of the reading process.	7.85	8.36	.008**

* p<.05; **p<.01

This table contains the fifteen statements in the Vaughan Scale as well as pre/post survey means, and significance of the differences between means, based on *t* tests. An examination of the table reveals significant changes in opinions for most of the statements in the survey. After having had the course, these students believed that they should help *their students* improve their reading ability, preteach technical vocabulary, teach study skills, help their students think on an interpretive level, set purposes for reading, and be familiar with the theoretical processes of reading.

A further examination of the table reveals no significant changes of opinion regarding the primary responsibility of the content teacher. Participants in the study had no strong feelings of loyalty to their content area vis-a-vis reading instruction. This was not entirely unexpected because the course was designed to explain to these preservice educators how to teach reading skills concurrently with their subjects. The one is the base for the other, so students were not forced to make a choice between teaching their content specialty and providing instruction in reading. Finally, students' strong disagreement with the statement in item 14 ("Reading instruction in secondary schools is a waste of time") on both pre- and post-measures, was enlightening and heartening. They entered the course feeling that such instruction is valuable and did not change their opinions at the end of the course.

The purpose of this study was to discover if preservice educators would change their opinions about the need for teaching reading skills to their students after they themselves participated in a required undergraduate reading methods course. The responses of the participants indicate that students' attitudes underwent significant changes during the course, and that they became more aware of the need for

teaching reading skills in the secondary program. Despite these gratifying results, there is no room for complacency. As Ratekin, Simpson, Alvermann and Dishner (1985) and Patberg and her colleagues (1984) have written, changing teachers' attitudes and knowledge about reading in subject matter areas is no guarantee that new attitudes and knowledge will be practiced in the classroom. What takes place in content area teaching, after education students become teachers themselves, is a topic for further research.

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