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BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE READING PROGRAM: FOUR IMPORTANT STEPS

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One of the most basic questions facing educators at all levels is that of constructing a reading program which meets the needs of all children and provides effective instruction in developmental, corrective, and remedial reading. To insure such conditions requires careful planning, thoughtful instruction, and thorough evaluation and measurement. The basic purpose of this article is to describe and analyze four important steps which should be followed in building a reading program that will help gain the objectives and goals mentioned previously.



I. Establishing a Body of Desired Skills.

The first and perhaps most important of all the steps involved in constructing a viable reading program is that of deciding what skills and competencies each pupil should develop at each of the learning levels. In a typical basal reading program the authors list in some detail all of the desired skills in a scope and sequence chart which usually encompasses such aspects as reading readiness, word attack, comprehension, vocabulary, and oral reading.

Tests are usually provided for each of the level readers which include data for the teacher to determine which

level reader the child should use and what skills have been mastered. These instruments are designed to measure proficiency in both the major skills and subskills which are enumerated on the scope and sequence chart. There is some disagreement among reading authorities regarding what the exact nature of these skills should be. Most present one list for decoding skills (for example, knowledge of letter-sound correspondences and recognition of prefixes and suffixes) and another list for comprehension skills (for example, identifying details and making inferences), but their sets of skills are rarely identical.¹

The commercial reading program selected for elementary children should reflect those objectives which teachers, administrators, and community leaders feel correlate with the instructional goals which have been established for the local school. Since reading is not a subject but a body of skills to be taught by all teachers at every grade level, a total school system reading program should be in evidence for all students from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. Karlin,² for example, notes that in typical high school reading programs, less attention will be paid to word recognition than to the other reading skills unless a student is a very deficient reader. He believes that some students will need help with adjusting the way they read according to their purposes and the nature of the material.

The total skills program, whatever its nature, should be undertaken to help insure that the graduates of a local school district can demonstrate basic literacy in all of the major aspects of reading, especially silent reading comprehension. Concurrent with the pursuit of reading skills, each teacher should emphasize basic proficiencies in writing, speaking, and listening.

II. Undertaking a Program of Reading Skills Evaluation

The second step involved in building an effective reading program is evaluating each pupil to gain an understanding relative to the degree to which the individual has learned the skills that constitute the major goals of the program.

One cannot establish a meaningful instructional strategy for pupils unless a careful analysis or evaluation has been made of their exact needs. From an instructional stand-

point, evaluation may be defined as a systematic process of determining the extent to which instructional objectives are achieved by pupils. Evaluation is a much more comprehensive term than measurement.³ In assessing the degree of reading skill attainment, an effective teacher employs many types of data in the process. These would include such measurement items as the scores from standardized achievement tests, observation of the learner while reading silently, evidences of word attack problems as noted from oral reading recitations, and reading interest as judged from listening to a child's conversation.

After gathering all of the necessary data from the evaluation sources, one should make a learning grid on which the names of the pupils are placed horizontally on the left side of the sheet and the list of desired skills or competencies are listed vertically across the top of the sheet. In each square a designation is made relative to the degree that the pupil has attained a given skill. The notations of the various deficiencies serve to indicate to the teacher the precise skills which should be emphasized in a certain student's reading program. Computer reading evaluation systems such as The Reading Style Inventory (Learning Research Associates, P.O. Box 39, Roslyn Heights, N.Y. 11577) provide an individual dual file for each child and reveal such items as perceptual strengths--preferences, best reading environment, emotional profile, sociological references, and physical references. Information is also provided with respect to the recommended strategies for teaching reading. Companies which produce basal reading series also provide appropriate computer software for evaluation procedures.

III. Initiating an Appropriate Teaching Strategies Curriculum

The third step is constructing or implementing a series of lessons or strategies to help each pupil reach his or her maximum potential in reading skills development. To meet the instructional needs of pupils, the teacher must provide lessons which will help each pupil. These activities can be those taken from the many books, worktexts, and workbooks which are on the market. Currently, many teachers are utilizing the vast array of developmental and tutorial lessons which are found in computer software stores. Some companies such as Computer Assisted Instruc-

tion, Inc., and Milliken provide programs which are individualized and meant to improve a pupil's deficiencies in such important areas as vocabulary, word attack, and comprehension.

The materials described previously can be used appropriately to supplement the basal reading program. (It is estimated that approximately 90% of the schools in the United States use a basal reading series as the primary curriculum requirement to teach children to read.) Additional strategies to help pupils can be derived from using the language experience approach, thus helping pupils to build sight word vocabulary and increase interest in reading in general. Regardless of the materials and strategies employed, teachers should see the correct instructional prescription needed in light of the data derived from the evaluation procedures enumerated in Section II.

IV. Conducting a System of Continuous Evaluation

The fourth step recommends numerous activities which are designed to evaluate the teaching strategies and lessons which they are currently employing. If measurement devices show that pupils are not making sufficient progress in the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains, another approach should be found which may be more satisfactory. It is important for all concerned instructors to remember that reading is a complex act and many factors must be considered; there is no correct way to teach reading (5). Effective reading instruction demands that teachers remain flexible in utilizing both evaluation and teaching strategies.

SUMMARY

An effective reading program can be realized if four sequential steps are followed as described in this article. First, educators must decide what skills and competencies they want their pupils to develop. Second, they must conduct a program of careful evaluation to determine what students need, to meet the desired goals. Third, a well constructed program of instruction should be incorporated which matches directly the precise instructional needs of the pupil. Fourth, continuous evaluation must be conducted to learn if the instructional objectives are being met. Building an effective reading program is a challenging

task; however, the goal can be realized if the proper steps are undertaken in the process.

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