

10-1-1983

Helping Children Develop Reading Competency for the Twenty- First Century

Donald C. Cushenbery
University of Nebraska at Omaha

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons



Part of the Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Cushenbery, D. C. (1983). Helping Children Develop Reading Competency for the Twenty-First Century. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 24 (1). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol24/iss1/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

HELPING CHILDREN DEVELOP READING COMPETENCY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Donald C. Cushenberry

FOUNDATION PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

Helping children develop appropriate reading competency for the twenty-first century is one of our most important functions as teachers of reading. As we move to a more technical society, it is very important that we help each child improve his or her reading skills to the maximum level possible. There are three major aspects discussed in this article. First, some of the social conditions which necessitate improved reading programs is outlined. Second, the important skills which we should emphasize in an effective reading program. Third, some principles for building a meaningful philosophy about reading instruction are explained. At the end of the article some thoughts are expressed relative to the importance of building lifetime reading habits.

Importance of Reading as a Literacy Skill

Of all the literacy skills which we educators emphasize, that of reading, may be the most important. Certainly students will not be able to function in today's society until they are able to recognize words, comprehend words, react to the words, and then make a logical decision based on what they have read or learned. We have, currently, over thirty million functionally illiterate adults in this country! These individuals are over the age of eighteen and cannot demonstrate a minimum sixth-grade instructional level in reading skills. There are many significant reasons for this particular condition. Perhaps one of the reasons is the fact that students have not developed appropriate reading skills in going from one grade level to the next. We need to be very sure that children have developed appropriate reading skills before promoting them to the next grade. In far too many instances, an adequate record system has been neglected and teachers have not been able to continue a precise planned program of reading instruction.

There are many aspects our our society which would cause us to want to be better teachers of reading and promote reading as a literacy skill. For example, many students as low as the fifth grade are regularly using illegal drugs. In 1975, nearly six percent of the nation's high school seniors reported using marijuana daily, as compared with an estimated 10.7% in 1978, and an approximate 15% in 1981. Some estimates today indicate that as many as 15 to 20% of the young people of many junior and senior high schools are regularly using mind-altering drugs. In other cases, over half of the student population have experimented with the drugs.

Since the development of reading skills requires the close attention of the student, the negative effect of illegal drug use has considerable significance. Certainly another aspect of the situation with regard to the current social picture is the rapid rise in the number of one parent families. Estimates reported in the media indicate that 20% of all children live in one parent homes. In some schools, as many as one-half of the children come from one parent homes. The one parent may not have the time to give the appropriate attention to his/her children because of work schedules and other concerns, and thus the reading level of the child is likely to suffer significantly.

There is also an alarming increase in the incidence of child abuse. It is estimated that a child dies from reported child abuse every four hours in this country. Many children are the victims of psychological abuse and other kinds of problems which are in a troubled home. With at least ten million persons unemployed, there has been a negative effect on reading abilities of children because there may be constant turmoil, the emotional turmoil that accompanies the fight for economic and physical survival. The rise in child abuse has been directly correlated with unemployment in many instances.

In a recent speech to the annual meeting of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, Dr. Ernest L. Boyer, former U. S. Commissioner of Education, painted some other grim pictures of social problems among today's young people. He said that 1) Forty percent of girls of 14 today will be pregnant at least once during the next five years;

2) One-third of America's teen-agers will have sexual intercourse by their fifteen birthday;

3) Forty-percent of high school students say they have had five or more drinks in succession during the past two weeks; and

4) Every hour, 57 teen-agers try to kill themselves.

These circumstances demand as never before that we develop effective reading programs for these and all young people.

Another aspect related to the development of reading literacy skill is that of the influence of television on a child's reading ability. Television viewing in the United States now averages about twenty-five hours per week for children six to eleven, and almost twenty-seven hours per week for those from two to five. Many reading specialists are greatly concerned about the amount of television viewing because they feel that television is replacing reading for young children. A few people promote the positive effects of the television and applaud it as an educational tool. We know, for example, that Sesame Street and Electric Company are two outstanding programs. Due to the advent of cable television in many areas, there is a great deal of concern about the unsupervised viewing of adult television programs by children. On level, it would appear that if television viewing is properly supervised, there can be advantages for reading. If not supervised, the effects may well be negative.

A fourth major aspect of teaching reading as a literacy skill

relates to the reading abilities of teachers themselves with respect to reading. In the April 8, 1981 issue of the Omaha World-Herald, Barbara Reynolds writes in a syndicated column that the reading and spelling abilities of teachers constitute nothing less than horror stories. One recent city to begin testing teachers is Baltimore. She says the school administrators of Baltimore decided they lacked the funds to prop up weak teachers. In Louisiana only 63% of the teachers passed appropriate spelling tests last year. The certification director for the state of Louisiana said some teachers are now moving out of the state to escape the testing laws. In Florida, the first state to require prospective teachers to take competency exams, about one out of four teachers failed the test last year. In Georgia, 20% of the 8,000 teachers failed a competency test which measured not only the basic skills but also professional knowledge. Georgia, like some other states gives prospective teachers three chances to pass the test and offers help with remedial courses in the community colleges.

In summary, we have a number of aspects of our present society which could make us think our whole environment precludes the building of reading as a literary skill. As reading educators, we need to realize that there are many things we can do to help our children prepare for the twenty-first century!

Important Reading Skills Which Students Should Develop

As we look at the manuals for the more common reading programs such as the basal reading program, and many of the more nationally known individualized reading programs, we generally see a large number of reading skills which are outlined for the students to develop. The teacher must decide which of the skills he or she will emphasize with the student. There are four major reading skill areas which should be emphasized: readiness skills, word analysis skills, vocabulary skills and comprehension skills.

Think of READINESS as being a lifetime proposition.

Reading readiness is not something which is just unique to primary children. To build specific readiness is a necessary item of any good lesson when one is dealing with older adults. We need to develop specific readiness for reading for almost anything. For example, we should not tell children to "read the story and then we'll discuss it." We need to give a little background for the study and help students set a purpose for reading. With primary children, the importance of auditory and visual discrimination, the ability to listen, and the ability to write simple sentences, should always be emphasized.

Of all of the factors relating to reading readiness, the two which probably are as important as any would be those of visual and auditory discrimination. Some reading authorities are of the opinion, for example, that a child should be able to name all of the letters of the alphabet, saying this is terribly important with regard to a child's readiness to read. Auditory discrimination may be the most important of these. All, of course, need to be evaluated rather carefully, and a child should not enter formal reading until he/she is ready.

The second major reading skill we need to emphasize
is the word analysis skill area.

The importance of phonics has been debated and discussed for decades and this topic has been a very emotional issue for many people. Some major critics of public schools feel, for example, that teachers have not emphasized phonics enough in their reading programs. We know, of course, that phonics is very important and that this particular tool will unlock at least 86 percent of the words in the English language. Along with phonics, we need to stress structural analysis, context clues, the use of the dictionary, and the development of an appropriate vocabulary of sight words. In any case, we need to remember that the ability to attack words and pronounce them is actually the heart of the reading act.

The third major reading skill—vocabulary

We have a number of different kinds of vocabularies which we should emphasize with students; the listening vocabulary, the speaking vocabulary, the reading vocabulary, and the writing vocabulary. The development of these vocabulary certainly is the function of every teacher. Words unique to a given subject area should be taught and emphasized; biology teachers should analyze such words as "photosynthesis" and "chlorophyll", mathematics teachers should acquaint students with "improper fractions" and "inverted triangle" in the many ways we can teach and reinforce vocabulary. As important as vocabulary growth is to effective reading, many teachers are leaving students to their own devices about gaining words through structural analysis.

A fourth major reading skill—comprehension

Reading authorities know that comprehension is the end product of reading and that a good teacher who understands the reading process will ask question on each of the four levels of comprehension. These aspects would be the literal, interpretive, critical and creative levels. Even at a very early age we need to ask questions which relate to each of these levels. In many cases, teachers seem to be concerned only with the literal and interpretive levels. The two higher levels are as important, if not moreso, to many students in their classes.

Developing a Philosophy of Reading Instruction

After having determined the reading skills that you would like for your students to develop, your next major question is that of how to construct a meaningful instructional program which will help your students to master the skills which you deem to be important. There are at least two steps to take—the first of which is a very effective program of diagnosis to determine which students have developed which reading skills.

Make a grid on which you list student names down the left side, the skills which are important are listed across the top. Various evaluative techniques will help you determine which students have developed these at 90% and which have not. Among the various technique you might use are observation, criterion reference tests, and reading achievement tests. Sometimes publishers of

basal readers will provide a unit test which is of great deal of importance to teachers. Through all of this, you will need to decide the critical level of competency which you will expect of each child.

The second step, a program of instruction to help students develop an appropriate level of reading proficiency, is more complex. Students are reading at different instructional levels, and have various preferred learning modalities. We should have a number of teaching techniques available for meeting the different needs and levels.

Currently, computer-assisted instruction is having a great impact on reading instruction for children. Programs such as the Apple, the TRS 80 and Plato have marvelous potentials for helping children develop various reading skills. These techniques have the capacity for diagnosis and remediation and can let the child go at his or her pace. The price may be coming down as this equipment becomes more plentiful. All teachers should take computer programming courses so they can construct their own programs which can meet the unique needs of their children. It seems essential that all teachers become computer literate.

A Lifetime Reading Competency for the Twenty-first Century

A most important affective concept needing promotion is simply that reading is a lifetime ability.

Of all the skills that we develop at school, reading has more promise for use throughout one's life. Those children who have had good teachers, who have been in good reading programs where teachers and parents have been excellent models for them, will quite likely develop healthy attitudes towards reading. The process should be promoted every day of every year. Older children, who have developed a dislike for reading because of bad experiences will be the losers as they grow older. Teachers must be role models and let children see them reading and enjoying books.

Despite the factors which seem to defeat our best efforts, we teachers can prepare children to read effectively in the next century. By accurate diagnosis, and through careful development, we can help pupils grow into a lifetime reading philosophy. Nancy Whitelaw of Buffalo, New York, says it best when she says that reading is enjoying, learning, feeling, becoming, sensing, laughing, crying, hating, deciding, loving, growing, sympathizing, listening. Reading is, most importantly, being, and becoming. That is the philosophy we must develop as we plan effective reading programs for our pupils who need to survive in the 21st century.

REFERENCES

- Aukerman, R.C. & L. R. Ackerman. How Do I Teach Reading? New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1981.
- Fry, E. Elementary Reading Instruction. NY: McGraw-Hill, 1977.
- Mangieri, John N. et al. Elementary Reading: A Comprehensive Approach. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1982.