

7-1-1983

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Recommended Citation

Clifton Hettinger, C. (1983). Secondary Reading: A Concern of the Past. A Trend of the Present, A Demand of the Future. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 23 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol23/iss4/6

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SECONDARY READING: A CONCERN OF THE PAST, A TREND OF THE PRESENT, A DEMAND OF THE FUTURE

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"The heart of their problem as a class was the simple skill of reading. There were four kids who couldn't read their own names, three or four who couldn't read anything else, and the rest of the class who could read a little but were always shaky about it ... they couldn't admit not knowing how to read and so they couldn't ever begin to learn, because in order to learn they'd have to begin, right there in class, with simplicities, easily identified by all as 'learning to read,' and open themselves up to scorn. Nothing doing. On the other hand, everything we were supposed to be doing in class presupposed that everybody could read ... If you couldn't read the printed word, what could you do?"

—James Herndon, The Way It Spozed to Be, page 91.

Educators have been concerned with the problem of reading at the secondary level for decades. It is the purpose of this paper to trace the manifestations of that concern and to provide insight into the current and future status of secondary reading instruction.

Not until the late 1920s and early 30s did teachers begin to test and measure reading ability, and that effort to quantify reading competency was accompanied by the emergence of the first silent-reading high school textbooks. Practitioners were not united regarding what to do about the secondary school student who could not read well. Illustrative of the confusion within the profession was an article published in 1929, entitled "Shall Instruction be Given?" Indeed, the predominant resource for secondary teachers wishing to improve their students' reading capabilities was contemporary books on elementary reading.

During the forties teachers were still seeking methods to help remedial readers. Simplified textbooks made their first appearance on the curricular market, and the first bona fide text for teachers—Developmental Reading in the High School (1941) also appeared. The problem of young adults who were unable to read satisfactorily was brought to the attention of the American public when over one million draftees were rejected for service in World War II on the basis of functional illiteracy.

The fifties brought some help for the poor reader in the

nation's high schools. Unfortunately, that help came in the form of an extra course in English, with the English teacher bearing the primary responsibility for any and all remedial instruction. A 1952 article entitled "How Can the Poor Reader in the Secondary School Be Rescued?", illustrates the scope of the problem and the attitudes of practitioners regarding its solution.

The 1960s brought attention to such topics as the relationship between reading and self-esteem, the whole notion of readability and its measurement, programmed instruction, and the cloze procedure both as a testing and a teaching technique. Amid all of this activity in the professional literature, the poor reader in the high school was still receiving the majority of his remedial instruction in his English class, if any at all was offered.

Inadequate Reading in the '70s

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (1970-80) revealed that 13 year-olds had gained slightly in literal comprehension, while 17 year-olds had declined in the inferential aspect of comprehension. Perhaps these findings reflect the increasing tendency of classroom teachers to ask literal questions rather than higher level of comprehension questions (Prosser 1978; Andre 1977). There is a renewed concern that adolescents still are not learning to read very well. That concern is being answered by the influx of more simplified textbooks in all content areas—books that, in essence, bring the level of the reading material down to the level of the students. That such a tactic may do a disservice to the poor reader in high school is suggested in the literature (Maxwell 1978; Miller 1979; Hettlinger 1980).

Another response to the fact that adolescent reading competence is less than adequate is the increased emphasis on teaching students not how to read better, but rather how to cope with the real world, upon communication skills that will benefit them in everyday life—on "survival skills".

Clearly, America is reading less competently than earlier generations. In the 1971 Gallup Poll, only 26% of the respondents indicated that they had read a hardcover or paperback book (not counting the Bible or textbooks) in the past month. Gallup Poll findings of 1974 indicated that 46% of those polled selected television as a spare time activity, whereas only 27% chose reading. The response of even the United States Navy to substandard reading skills of recruits has been to rewrite its training manual in a lower, more easily readable style.

Today and Tomorrow

The 1980s bring some refreshingly healthy trends to the problem of high school reading deficiencies. Administrators are being asked by school boards to implement school-wide reading programs. Parents are demanding a back-to-basics approach to learning and are becoming increasingly involved in their children's reading, according to a 1980 Gallup Poll. Content area teachers are receiving in-service training in comprehension and vocabulary development techniques and in the integration of reading strategies with content mastery.

What lies ahead for the poor reader in the high school classroom? Certainly survival skills will continue to be taught, along with such competencies as following directions, active listening, and critical thinking. Although they do not constitute a panacea for the problem of reading in the secondary school, simplified textbooks of the high-interest, low-vocabulary sort have flooded the curricular market and are here to stay. Students will do more and more magazine and paperback book reading, so the role of the teachers may well be to guide that reading to its maximum benefit. The Reading Specialist will do less work with individual students, finding herself in the classroom, working with subject matter teachers to improve the reading competence of whole classes of students. Teachers will be encouraged and urged, if not required, to take university courses in secondary reading. Then the problem of the high school student who cannot read well may be met head-on instead of skirted or bypassed.

Certainly the influence of the computer in classrooms of the future cannot be denied. Already computers are used to diagnose reading problems, prescribe remediation, to generate word lists, record language-experience stories, to model the reading process, to create motivational games, simulate informal reading inventories, expedite reading research, generate tests from item banks, and translate print into braille.

Research continues to show that no one piece of gadgetry nor any one instructional method will ensure reading success. Teacher effectiveness studies indicate that students want teachers who know their material and teach it with mastery (Ruddell 1981). The answer to the demand for reading competence in the high school surely lies in teachers attuned to the problem and prepared to confront it.

"We ain't learning anything, Mr. Herndon. Why don't you teach us nothing? You sozed to teach us that book!"

Herndon, page 96

Teacher preparation institutions must teach potential teachers how to teach any book in any content area. Practicing high school teachers must be instructed in methods they can use today, right now, to improve the reading competence of their students. We as educators are presently operating in just such a mode, and certainly we will continue, for that is as it should be, if we are to meet the unique demand of the high school student who cannot read adequately.

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