Characteristics of Reading Programs in Michigan Community and Junior Colleges

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A study of the characteristics of reading programs offered to students in the thirty-three publicly supported community and junior colleges in the State of Michigan indicates that there are areas in which great strides have been made and other areas in which much work needs yet to be done. A mailed questionnaire adapted from the instrument used by Dr. Ted K. Kilty in his study of *Reading Programs in Penal Institutions* was utilized to gather the information. Twenty-two of the institutions, or exactly two-thirds of the sample, returned the questionnaires which asked for information on eleven characteristics of the reading programs offered to their students. The characteristics included: levels of instruction, training of the reading instructor, method of teacher involvement, method of student involvement, placement testing, reading materials available, the characteristics of the program, comparison of number of students involved versus number of students eligible, record of students progress, availability of further reading programs, and the funding source.

Levels of Instruction

All but one of the responding institutions (96%) reported that reading instruction is offered to the students at their institutions. The responses also indicated that there is a descending frequency in the difficulty levels of the reading instruction provided. Twenty-two (100%) of the institutions reported that they offer reading instruction at the 7th grade level and above; nineteen (86%) also offered reading instruction for grade levels 4 through 6; and twelve (55%) provide reading instruction in basic skills at grade levels 1 through 3.

Training of Reading Instructor

Although almost all of the people presenting reading instruction are employees of the institution (91%), six of the institutions also reported using para-professionals, volunteer tutors and student teachers from teacher-training colleges.

Methods of Student Involvement

With the exception of one institution which did not answer the question, all of the respondents reported that students may receive reading instruction by requesting it. In an unexpected but encouraging trend, it was also noted that eight (36%) of the institutions further require that some students receive reading instruction. However, the criteria varied widely. All eight of the institutions noted that such assignment was based upon test results. In deciding which level and type of instruction should be presented, eighteen (82%) reported the use of a diagnostic test, nine (41%) used informal reading inventories, five (23%) used trial lessons, and eight (36%) utilized other methods. It should be noted that these types were not mutually exclusive; that is, an institution which used diagnostic testing may also use informal reading inventories and/or trial levels in combination.

Materials Available

Three types of materials were reported by more than three-fourths of the institutions responding. Most frequently used were workbooks, noted by twenty (91%) of the institutions. Separate reading devices of the controlled reader type were reported by eighteen (82%) of the institutions, and programmed materials with difficulty levels of the S.R.A. type were noted by seventeen (77%). Materials reported by 50% or more of the responding institutions included tachistoscopes (Tach-x type)– 59%, books for free reading 59%, and sight-sound projection (Aud-x) 50%. Not being utilized by at least half of the institutions were magazines 46%, newspapers 41%, and graded materials of the classroom series type 18%.

Time Requirements of the Program

As would be expected, the average length of time that the students stayed in the program was one term or one semester depending upon the school calendar. Typically, the time required amounted to approximately three classroom periods per week. Some institutions noted that the classroom structure through which the reading was presented was one session per week for a three hour block, whereas other institutions noted one fifty minute class period per day three times a week. It should also be noted that some of the institutions reported that the instruction was provided on a walk-in basis whereby students could avail themselves of an instructional or tutorial laboratory as they wished.

Comparison of Student Involvement to Student Eligibility

The number of students involved compared to the number of students eligible was approximately one to sixty. The average number of students enrolled in the programs was reported to be 100 and the average number of students enrolled on the campuses of those reporting was slightly over 6,000.

Records of Student Progress

All of the responding institutions reported that they kept records of the students' progress.

Availability of Future Reading Programs

Only five (28%) of the respondents reported the existence of a second reading program.

Funding Sources

Three (18%) institutions indicated that a portion of their funding was from federal sources. Eleven (52%) cited state funds as a source of their funding, and eight (38%) received funds from city-county monies. However, twelve (57%) noted that at least a portion of their funds came from tuition and their own operating budgets. Again, as was the case for placement testing, the numbers were not mutually exclusive, and funds were reported to be from a combination of varying sources by several of the respondents.

Interpretation and Recommendations

The fact that the overwhelming majority of community and junior colleges respond that reading instruction is offered to the students is indeed encouraging. However, the open-door policy that most community and junior colleges pursue indicates that the lack of reading instruction in almost half of the institutions at the basic skills levels could effectively bar students who, for one reason or another, have completed their formal training in the public schools and who nevertheless lack enough reading ability to engage in work offered at the community and junior colleges. It is not the position of this writer that students should be encouraged or even allowed to attend classes offering college work without possessing basic skills, but the lack of the availability of basic skills instruction makes it quite certain that the individual who needs such instruction will have to obtain it elsewhere if in fact it is available at all. The recognition that the people in charge of the reading program should have formal training in the teaching of reading and should also be a certified teacher is evidenced by the high percentage of positive responses received on both questions and is commendable. Apparently community and junior colleges recognize the need to employ their own teachers for reading programs as evidenced by the 90% of institutions reporting that their reading teachers are employed by the community and junior colleges. The involvement of student teachers and para-professionals in delivery of those services is also a positive step.

One of the weaknesses focused by the findings is the number of institutions that require some students to receive reading instruction. Although all but one of the institutions noted that a student may receive reading instruction by requesting it, it is most unlikely that the total number of students who need reading instruction is being adequately

identified. Although approximately one-third of the institutions utilize one criteria or another to require that students below a certain level receive reading instruction, it is strongly suggested that all of the institutions administer a standardized reading test which would permit identification of students whose measurable skills would not predict success in the courses offered in that institution and who would be required to take reading improvement courses that could provide the basis of success before the student could be registered for courses involving reading.

The major number of institutions who reported the use of diagnostic tests to establish the kind of reading project to be presented is not only positive but correlates well with the high number of institutions reporting reading program personnel who have formal training in the teaching of reading. However, the findings obtained from the respondents are curious in that less than 50% of the institutions included informal reading inventories and trial lessons as means of determining the instruction to be presented. It is far more likely that teachers with reading instruction would be trained in using the latter two methods than it is that they would be competent to administer diagnostic tests.

The high number of institutions reporting the utilization of workbooks with exercises to be completed as well as the speed reading and programmed materials apparently demonstrates a desire on the part of the reading teachers to provide instruction for the various reading levels of students incorporated within any class. It is also noted that the use of newspapers and magazines is not as great as would be anticipated and that the graded readers of the classroom series type with which many students have probably had unsuccessful experiences are seldom used.

A second area in which there appears to be room for growth is the time characteristics of the program. The length of the program, one term or one semester, with the reported three class hours per week will be successful only in instances where that amount of instruction will provide the difference between the degree of success the student is initially experiencing and the level that he needs to be successful. It is unlikely that three class hours per week for fifteen to eighteen weeks, a total of forty-five to fifty-four hours, would in itself strengthen the reading skills of students successfully to permit them to compete in community and junior colleges. It is recommended that not only should the reading be required but that the amount of instruction should be increased to the point at which success in achieving the needed reading skills is a reasonable expectancy.

It is encouraging that all of the respondents note that they keep records of the students' progress. Although only five (28%) of the institutions state that there is a continuing reading program available, it may be that the reading program in existence can be repeated and continued as long as the student needs it; and, therefore, a need for a second program would not necessarily be indicated.

The fact that more than 50% of the institutions report that tuition and the general operating budget provide funds for the institution for the reading program is a trend in the right direction which nevertheless needs

much growth. Although twelve (57%) of the institutions report such financial sources, ten (43%) do not. The scope of the program is not likely to be successful without the financial support of the institution in addition to the federal, state or city-county funding that is provided.

Finally, the ratio of one student out of sixty who is receiving reading instruction is almost certain to be far below the number of students who need it. Without the testing to identify students with reading problems, the increase in the amount of time engaged in reading instruction, and the further increase of supportive funding, the number of students receiving reading instruction cannot reach the goal of providing adequate reading instruction to every student enrolled at community and junior colleges who needs it.