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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

Kenneth VanderMeulen

High School Teachers and Research in Reading

Recently a teacher at a reading institute asked a member of a panel on teaching reading, "Just what innovations in teaching reading may we look for in the coming years?" The panel member was hesitant, saying there are individual ideas for improved strategies coming out in published form every season, but that he could not espouse a single method as being superior. The teacher who asked the question was obviously not satisfied, still convinced as she was that some theory or new piece of machinery could be her salvation in the classroom. That the panel member was disappointing in his answer was not of great consequence, but the fact that some groundwork *might have been* laid for an important branch of reading research is of much more importance.

What is missed and badly needed is the kind of research work in each classroom that adds basis to (or refutes) the ideas and theories which are published in papers, texts, and workbooks every week of every school year. We actually are performing a disservice to our students when we listen to or read somebody's ideas on teaching reading, and then go back to our classes and employ the methods as if they were infallible. That is about as useless as refusing to allow anyone's ideas on the subject into one's mind. In both instances, we are remaining blind to the requirements of critical thinking, to the definition of professionalism, and to the need for adapting new ideas to our individual natures.

How can we avoid this often voiced criticism, that we high school teachers tend to take one of the two extremes; to reject out-of-hand ideas that have come from theorists, or to take ideas in the teaching of reading as if they were prescriptions and use them without the addition of an iota of imagination? One, we can stop to realize that all important improvements started with ideas, with theories. Second, we can remember that teachers are at least as different as students—that what works in your classroom may not work in mine, because there are so many variables. Thus, to put ideas to use and make a contribution to the total area of teaching reading at the same time, each teacher should think of himself as a researcher in reading.

The usual response to a suggestion that the auto mechanics teacher or the English teacher become a researcher is a hoarse "Wha—? Research? Me?" Along with expletives, one normally hears remarks about not caring for statistics, or that research is dull, dry stuff.

Yet, when we consider our methods of teaching in each class hour we have to conclude that most of the approaches we employ to bring about the necessary objectives in effective teaching are the results of research learned from texts or lectures. If we admit to doing some experimenting in our classes, and almost all good teachers do, we tend to call it trial-and-error. Now it is time for every teacher to look carefully at the possibility of making contributions to reading improvement through using some of the devices or tools of research.

One of the basic tenets of professionalism requires that a person learn as much as possible about what has been found to be true in his field of endeavor. If teachers, who are well versed in their content areas, wish to be truly professional about the process by which students learn to master those content courses, they should read and utilize what has been found to be true about reading and study skills development during the past few decades. Much is being learned and described in print by the leaders in research at learning centers and laboratory schools. And the rate at which research materials on reading is appearing is accelerating. By the end of World War Two, a little over twenty-five hundred studies on reading were in print. In the next ten years, over a thousand studies about various aspects of reading were published. The following decade saw the publication of well above two thousand studies, of which a sizable proportion dealt with high school and junior high reading and teaching reading in the content areas. The totals are not in as we come to the end of another ten years, but it is safe to say that even more attention has been paid to the reading problems of the secondary school in research reports.

However, unless teachers in the classrooms become the consumers and users of these multitudes of research studies with their recommendations, there will be no changes made, and all of us will be doomed to go down the years making the same series of errors over and over. The void that exists between the researcher and the professional classroom teacher can only be removed by the judicious choice of recommendations from a few reputable researchers, a tentative utilization of some of the ideas, *and* a careful and accurate report of the circumstances, observation, and conclusions shared by each classroom teacher involved.

If, as was suggested earlier, each teacher regards himself as a part of the total professional research team, out to learn the best approaches to solving education's many problems—reading failures may become obsolete in our schools. By casting oneself in this different role from the routine classroom teacher, one may see the concepts in rather new ways.

The four objectives we need to consider for ourselves are: 1) we should become aware of the sources of materials of research at the secondary level; 2) we should make ourselves more understanding and critical about research in reading; 3) we should learn to recognize the importance and benefits of research; and, 4) we should see ourselves as researchers, and communicate our ideas and findings with colleagues.

To avoid losing our way to misunderstandings from the outset we must

see research as having two definitions. One part of the definition describes research as experimentation in order to discover new facts or new interpretations of formerly held theories. The other part of the definition sees research as applying the new or revised theories, and checking the validity of the ideas expressed. In the first, we originate ideas for improved teaching of reading. In the latter, we use the idea in part or totally, so that we may test it, observe the idea in practical settings, and draw some professional conclusions about the idea—contributing important data to the destiny of that idea, law, theory, or whatever.

And, while we are mentioning a few of the ground rules for this fascinating game of research, let us remember the criteria—objectivity, diligence, and comprehensiveness. Regarding objectivity, we must avoid deciding in advance what the outcome of the experiment will be. If we read D. H. Cohen's article "The Effect of Literature on Vocabulary and Reading Achievement" in *Elementary English* (Feb., 1968), for instance, and we wish to repeat the study at the secondary level, we need to restrain our thoughts about similar or opposite results. Diligence requires performing the same little experiment enough times, with sufficient uniformity, to make quite sure of outcomes. Louis Pasteur expressed the epitome for diligence in research when he said to his students, "The gentlemen may ask you to prove yourself right; but I say to you—try to prove yourself *wrong!*"

Being comprehensive means using one's judgment about the limits of a study. Take a small part, but be complete about it. That's all there is to it. If you see reading as all one act, you are not ready to do research. If you recognize that reading is visual, neurological, experiential, emotional, auditory, intellectual, and social (and we haven't exhausted that list), you might be interested in looking into what's been written about one of these areas. And again, each area will be divided into causes, effects, uses of, the act of, factors involved in, and *these* may be too general.

The most basic and by far the most edifying way to conduct classroom research is to attempt a duplication of someone's previous findings. Try to set up similar conditions (noting accurately wherein the circumstances are perceptibly different), recording as much of the local data as possible, so that your findings can be precise, even if not similar. You should remember that repeating a study is valuable as verifying research, since all research should be subject to replication. Don't allow yourself to downgrade or belittle the results of your classroom research.

Many teachers hesitate to do classroom research because they are intimidated by the complexity of statistical requirements and the shadow of the computer. The researcher who is wise in his design or plan of research is much more important than such service as the computer can render. Anyway, oftentimes research may be made up entirely of the teacher's observations of cases over a period of time, leading to conclusions totally without statistics.

We mentioned the necessity of an attitude of appreciation for the importance of research. The fact is that we would still be in the dark ages in reading were it not for the findings of researchers. We learned about eye

movements and span of fixations through optometric measurement research. Researchers taught us the importance of silent reading. Research is helping us to avoid some serious errors by testing and reporting on the gadgets and gimmicks which profiteers put on the market.

The need for research at the secondary level should be known to all high school teachers. Teachers would be rendering service to the field by looking carefully into such questions as: What factors are causative in students' attitudes toward reading in science (or math, social science, etc.)? How can we measure student interpretation? What methods promote critical reading? How can we teach reading in content courses? Other topics of interest to researchers relate to motivation of students, reaction of students to varying teacher approaches, how students use reading, what are the effects of using various supplemental reading materials, interests of students, building reading programs, and teaching vocabulary. Since good research usually originates from and centers around a specified problem, it seems to this writer that we have a veritable plethora of possible starting points at the secondary level. Sometimes the results of a research study will themselves suggest other needs for investigation and identification of problems to study. The report by Dr. Roger Applebee to the National Council of Teachers of English in the late 60's that literature was given ten times as much attention as the process of reading caused much research and rethinking by administrators who assumed that English teachers *are* reading teachers.

Remember, however, that you should remain critical as you read the research summaries and recommendations of others. Ask yourself why this particular piece of research was undertaken. Did the writer have a genuine problem which needed to be seen more clearly, or was the problem only that the writer needed to do some research for the sake of his position, promotion, or prestige? Look carefully at the reason for the reading research.

When you have found a set of several research summaries that are relevant to your situation and interests, you may be moved to write your own problem, plan, and hypothesis. You might discuss the problem with a friend over coffee, try to get second opinions, and ask for advice (which may lead to your plan and a statement of hypothesis). Try to remember that research is no more than a technical word describing Yankee pragmatism—a calculating person who looks at his problem, and says, "I wonder what would happen if I were to. . . ."

Finally, where should one look in order to read about some of the thousands of research studies made in the field of reading? Obviously, the most efficient way to become conversant with the questions and answers in the field is to put oneself on the mailing list of the International Reading Association, Newark, Delaware, 19711; the National Reading Conference, or the Claremont Annual Reading Conference.

Probably the quickest way to learn what is being said and written in the area is to find the nearest university which has the ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) facility. If geography or economics prevents

joining the former or traveling to the latter, another recourse is to find and purchase for the school professional shelf a few excellent books on what has been and is being learned about teaching secondary reading. Basic books such as Albert J. Harris' *How to Increase Reading Ability*, Arthur Heilman's *Principles and Practices of Teaching Reading*, and Smith and Dechant's *Psychology of Teaching Reading* should be part of every high school inservice library.

Other books which refer to studies and research in reading at the secondary level are: Burmeister, Lou, *Reading Strategies for Secondary School Teachers*; Hafner, Lawrence, *Improving Reading in Middle and Secondary Schools*; Karlin, Robert, *Teaching Reading in High School*; Shepherd, David, *Comprehensive High School Reading Methods*; Thomas, Ellen, and H. Alan Robinson, *Improving Reading in Every Classroom*.