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Professional Concerns

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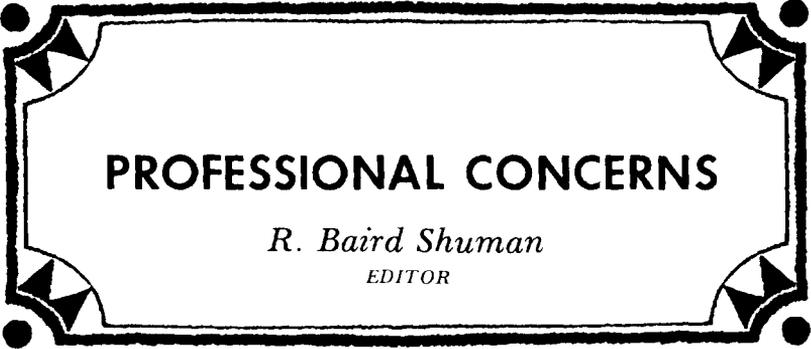


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PROFESSIONAL CONCERNS

R. Baird Shuman

EDITOR

Professional Concerns is a regular column devoted to the interchange of ideas among those interested in reading instruction. Send your comments and contributions to the editor. If you have questions about reading that you wish to have answered, the editor will find respondents to answer them. Address correspondence to R. Baird Shuman, Department of Education, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina 27708.

Most teachers of reading have realized the necessity of providing situations in which disabled readers can practice their reading skills without the embarrassment of letting other people know that they have deficiencies in these skills. One of the ultimate tasks of the teacher of reading is to provide situations in which students can work toward improving their skills while at the same time retaining their dignity and not jeopardizing their self-images.

Barbara Bliss, a counselor in the Barneveld Public Schools in Wisconsin, has devised a means by which students can work in a somewhat private situation toward increasing their reading speed and efficiency.

Ms. Bliss has enlisted the help of people in the community to record on cassettes materials which the reading students in her school are working with. Her report should be of considerable help to teachers who are seeking to find a means of individualizing instruction in reading while at the same time making the process one of self-instruction.

SIGHT/SOUND READING PRACTICE

At best, learning to read is a long, slow process. The more successful a child is at reading, the more he reads. The less successful he is, the greater the chance that he will stop trying to read and engage in other, more rewarding activities. Lack of reading practice causes a widening intellectual gap between the non-reader and the avid reader. By eighth grade, students may be reading and comprehending anywhere between 120 and 400 words per minute. Obviously this creates problems for teachers as well as students.

To attempt to narrow this gap, a recorded reading practice program is being undertaken in a small rural Wisconsin school. The overall objective is to make reading a successful, pleasureable, rewarding experience rather

than a frustrating, humiliating, negative experience. We ask non-readers, 7th-12th grade, to practice reading with a recording at least one period a day. We provide an attractive room with tape recorders, record players, and study pillows. The available books are exciting, interesting, and sophisticated. Students make their own choices and need not finish a book if it seems to be too juvenile, too difficult, or "boring." After several weeks we explain that a good way to check one's reading rate is to turn down the volume and read silently for awhile, then turn up the volume to see whether the student or the narrator is ahead. Narrators average 175-200 words per minute on recordings. No one fails or is embarrassed if the reading rate is still slower than the recording. The student continues recorded reading practice as long as he needs it.

What happens? Restless students settle down to reading each day for a full class period. Simultaneously, they hear words correctly pronounced and phrased. Gradually, they realize that they can understand the content and thus are not "retarded." With audio aid, they soon read a book a week. (We keep score on a wall chart.) Soon they ask to come in during study periods or lunch hour. As their self-confidence grows, they request more sophisticated books. Eventually, most are able to appreciate and enjoy their high school English classes. Drop out rate decreases. Reading rate and school effort increases.

This daily sight/sound reading practice program does not take the place of reading instruction. It is not meant to teach reading. It is merely a way to make certain that inadequate readers continue to learn through books. The necessity for such a program has probably come about because TV has replaced reading as the way to spend hours of unstructured time. Reading skills learned in elementary school are not practiced enough. While learning to read is probably the single most important skill in the educational process, blind students have successfully used recorded books for many years. We must not lose sight of the fact that reading is *a tool* not *the goal* of education. Anyone who cannot use this tool must be allowed another tool which will insure continuing education. Recorded books used with accompanying text can do a great deal to insure enjoyment of books for slow readers and provide the necessary intellectual input that they need.

Barbara Bliss