Reading in the Secondary School: A Self-Help Reading Laboratory

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Movements to begin all-school reading programs often wait for the right set of circumstances and may be in the planning stages while hundreds of students are missing the spark they might provide. We should think of a means of setting some of the wheels turning, even if the school does not seem ready for all phases to be put into action. It is a sad fact that many high schools have nothing approaching an emphasis on reading; therefore, there is nothing to call teachers' attention to the importance of improving reading skills in every class. If no one takes responsibility for attending to the vital matter of reading at the secondary level, teachers will continue to teach their content material without helping students refine their skills for learning.

The ideal way to set a program in motion is to administer tests of reading levels throughout the school. However, if the school is given no impetus in this direction, student reading needs are not measured and nothing in the way of a reading program is indicated. Thus no one acts. If the administrator is approached about instituting a reading laboratory or all-school reading program in the high school, he may simply shrug his shoulders and turn palms upward in mute eloquence. There is no trained personnel, there is no money, there is no room, there are no materials, there is no equipment. A teacher cannot easily overcome those odds.

Nevertheless, this writer believes there is a sure-fire way to start action toward all-school support for reading improvement. The strategy lies in starting a developmental reading laboratory for the adequately motivated students in the school. Students of normal reading and comprehension levels often desire a place and the means for increasing their proficiency in a variety of skills. While a school's financial situation may not be able to support a fully equipped diagnostic and remedial reading laboratory for the severely retarded and problem readers, it can most certainly provide the atmosphere of a reading improvement program with many areas of potential for extending both scope and service. The idea here is starting something; initiating action with a place where students may help themselves, thus building into the plan the element of success at the outset.

The self-help emphasis is based on several studies and observations,

all leading to a conclusion that students who are encouraged to account for their own progress through independent effort usually make better gains in skills improvement than students in teacher-dominated classes. As one example of evidence in support, we might cite the research reported by Russell Burgett to the IRA in May, 1972. He indicated that high school students made greater gains than the control group when they were allowed to test their own reading strengths and weaknesses, work with self-selected materials for academic progress, and assess their own gains through self-administered survey tests. Burgett elaborated by specifying other benefits incurred through the experiment, such as increased incentive and self-reliance.

To set up a reading laboratory for independent self-help, a teacher or group of teachers needs only the resolution to begin and the persistence to see it through. As an excellent initial propellent, one might make a public statement that he is about to set up a developmental reading laboratory in the school, despite the well-known fact that the "right circumstances" do not prevail. The statement of intention will provide sufficient reaction so that a teacher may easily learn where cooperation and aid may be found.

In order to help the reader visualize such a laboratory in action, we will describe a completed and operating developmental reading laboratory in its physical setting and in its uses. The objectives in the whole concept are as follows: 1) to initiate some movement toward a school-wide program; 2) to facilitate student self-help in a variety of ways; 3) to draw attention of colleagues and promote cooperation; 4) to keep investment of time as well as money to a minimum.

The laboratory we are seeing in operation is physically quite small, perhaps only twelve by twelve feet. It is furnished with a file cabinet, a table, desk, several shelves of full wall length, and six or seven comfortable chairs. On the desk is a Junior Controlled Reader, and the directions taped on the desk tell the student where he may find the film strips and comprehension tests for the controlled reader. This part of the program is for those students whose percentile on the rate section of the Nelson-Denny Reading Comprehension Test fell at or below forty. The student who starts a rate improvement program uses a dittoed chart on which he keeps a full record of his effective rate. Effective Rate is a term given to the product of the words-per-minute rate of reading the selection multiplied by the percent of comprehension on the test. This process tends to keep down the incidence of unrealistic rates and haphazard guessing on the quizzes.

A second area in which students are willing to practice individually

is that of spelling. Frequently, one's lack of adequate spelling training is a dark secret he wishes to keep from others, but which will constitute a serious obstacle in adult life. Yet, teachers who stress correct spelling are often resented, obviously, because such drill further erodes student confidence. The self-help lab, therefore, has two levels of spelling tests on recorder-cassettes for screening. One level is the thirty-three word list by William Kottmeyer—illustrating the spelling generalizations which should be known by students entering high school. The higher level is a set of thirty-three words from the Syracuse University list of "One Hundred Words Most Frequently Misspelled by Educated People." The cassette directs the student to take a blank sheet of paper from the shelf, write the words pronounced for him, and then correct his own words using the printed sources. If one misses more than six words, he is encouraged to start a spelling improvement program from the initial step, the demonstration cassette entitled "You Can Become a Perfect Speller." The tape, adapted from the V/A/K/T Spelling Method, convinces the listener that studying spelling should be multisensory, involving auditory and kinesthetic memory as well as visual, and uses the spelling of CHRYSANTHEMUM to teach the listener how sound learning principles, not simple repetition, should be used in spelling study.

Cassettes for the listing of groups of words need not be an expensive item. By putting a list of twenty-five words on each side of a thirty-minute tape, the lab can offer students a spelling improvement program encompassing twenty-four steps, good for use by many students, for less than twenty dollars. It is easy to find apt and able students to read the words on the cassettes at no cost to the school.

A second vital part of the program for cassette tapes is that of vocabulary building. There are many sources of interesting materials about words, some of which can easily be adapted to brief cassette lessons. In the lab we are describing, the cassettes contain a "Word Building Program," with brief discussions about prefixes, roots, and modern examples based on Carter and McGinnis' *Effective Reading for College Students.* If students regard the tapes as "home-made," they also recognize the intention of the program as beneficial to them.

The third of the four areas for self-help in the developmental lab (first and second being mechanics of reading and cassette programs in spelling and vocabulary) is the file card system which attempts to help students identify and eliminate minor flaws in their study habits and attitude or emotional adjustment. For example, a student who says he "cannot get interested" in his history text may look into the card file.

Here, on the alphabetized tabs, is one marked *Interest*. A glance at the 5 by 8 card shows a number of books treating that particular difficulty in study. The books are referred to by number, followed by chapter and page. The student finds number 76 (*The Techniques of Reading,* by Judson), and turns to page 227, where he finds a brief but comprehensive discussion of his exact trouble.

Other topics treated in the card file are skimming, note-taking, rate flexibility, concentration, phrase reading, sentence meaning, retention, key words, and many more.

A partial list of books to keep on the shelves for giving students helpful information about reading difficulties are as follows:

Armstrong	Study is Hard Work
Baker	Reading Skills
Braam	Developing Efficient Reading
Carter & McGinnis	Effective Reading for College Students
Center	The Art of Book Reading
Cosper	Toward Better Reading Skill
Gilbert	Breaking the Reading Barrier
Herr	Effective Reading for Adults
Judson	The Techniques of Reading
Preston	How to Study
Robinson	Effective Study
Shefter	Faster Reading Self-taught
Smith	Be a Better Reader
Triggs	Improve Your Reading
Witty	How to Become a Better Reader
Wood	Reading Skills

(The above is only a small sampling of the books which are available to use, but will serve to start the system with a core of the best and most useful volumes.)

The fourth area is to offer students specific lessons in workbooks to remedy weaknesses in reading which are identified by diagnostic tests. These self-assessment and practice sessions in this fourth area are more closely supervised by a teacher or adult than the other three parts of the reading laboratory, because there is scoring and interpreting of standardized tests involved. The participant may take a test on his own but cannot analyze the results to see his strengths and weaknesses in reading without help in scoring. Steps forward from this point depend upon the student. Knowing his needs, he may scan the tables of con-

tents of such workbooks as *Be a Better Reader, Breaking the Reading Barrier, Basic Reading Skills for High School Use, Design for Good Reading,* and others. A copy or two of each workbook lie on the shelves for student use, but instructions request that all answers be put on note-book paper, kept in student folders. One highly useful workbook is *Tactics in Reading,* Olive S. Niles, because it includes two forms of diagnostic tests for pre- and post-evaluations, and is divided into eleven subtests, with drills and practices exactly applicable to the student needs.

In summary, it is feasible and useful to provide a self-help type of developmental reading laboratory for the adequately motivated student. It increases self-reliance, has obvious benefits in academic growth, can be expanded in many directions, and will serve to alert teachers to the ways reading growth can be fostered in all content areas.

from Musings of a Sixth Grader

COIN COLLECTING

Going to a store
Asking change for a dollar
Searching still searching
For an old dime or penny
Oh well, better luck next time.

Carl Erickson

RADIANCE

She was radiant
Standing in a moonlit field
She was beautiful
Glowing with her outward pride
And why? Because she loved him.

Carol Robinson