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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL: THE ROLE OF THE READING RESOURCE PERSON IN HIGH SCHOOL

Kenneth VanderMeulen

It is almost a sure bet that when someone graduates from a college or university with a number of credit hours in the teaching of reading, the hiring institution will attempt to employ this person as a *remedial* reading instructor. It is secondly a sure bet that the personnel director will recommend this graduate to a principal who has been beset by complaints about reading problems in all the content area classes. And, according to the typical history, the teachers in that high school will refer to the new reading teacher those students who are deep in academic difficulties.

The story does not have a happy ending; the new reading teacher is kept so busy learning which students are attitudinal problems, which are slow learners, and which are merely corrective problems in certain reading skills—that she cannot take the time to establish necessary rapport with content course teachers. Furthermore, because of the lack of administrative foresight, the reading teacher is too occupied with the work of setting up a referral system and means of reporting to do anything of a positive or constructive nature. Being new, she probably doesn't know how to protest this Frankensteinian reading "program" which is burgeoning in reverse. It is doomed to limp along, with no one in the classroom any wiser, with none of the teachers any better off, and the reading teacher never given the opportunity to show leadership or imagination.

Who is responsible for this miscarriage of education? According to the charts showing chain of authority and division of duties, the leader and exemplar of quality education should be the principal. While we do not wish to inveigh against administration, we must say, the support and encouragement that an imaginative and progressive reading program requires have to come from the department chairmen and principals. No real reading program can logically result when a person trained to teach reading improvement is put on the endless cycle of seeing five to ten disabled readers an hour, five days a week. What

compounds the problem is that subject matter teachers have stereotyped the so-called remedial reading teacher as someone who offers sympathy and academic pabulum to potential “flunk-outs.” Of course, this kind of thinking constitutes a major obstacle to open communication, and precludes any use of the trained reading person as a resource for all-school in-service programs, or as consultant, or advisor on reading problems.

Somewhere, between the dismal picture of the reading teacher bogged down in a frustrating routine that is out of touch with the rest of the school, and the ideal all-school reading program painted for us by the experts who see total cooperation and positive enthusiasm in all staff members as requisite—there must be a way to use personnel and talent to build for measurable success in a reasonable amount of time. Setting realistic goals, using staff members wisely, and keeping the lines of communications open; these are the responsibilities of the administrator. One other responsibility the principal should accept is to let himself or herself be convinced that hiring a *reading resource person* would be infinitely wiser than naming the person “remedial” reading teacher.

Defining the role and duties of a reading resource person requires at least a brief look at the genesis of the term itself. Historically, according to Nila Banton Smith, the growth of the movement to hire persons for supervising the teaching of reading took place in the 1930's. (*American Reading Instruction*, I. R. A., 1965, pp. 305-6.) In this context, the terms reading supervisor, reading coordinator, and special supervisor of reading were used interchangeably and without distinction. The typical emergence of the reading supervisor may be described as one who was “moved up” from the position of English teacher because of her enthusiasm for or concern about the need for teaching reading. However, emotional fervor does not always result in expertness in the teaching of reading, just as moving someone to a position of reading supervisor does not automatically make one a leader of teachers in the field.

Some of the texts and manuals in the area employ the term *consultant*, the definition of which may include a range of ideas in application, but none that rule out the use of such a person for workshops, in-service, or related capacities of a more or less permanent nature. In recent years, the term consultant has been narrowed down in meaning; the concept now generally carries the stipulation that it is a position freed of all classes, or as the person who will direct the organiza-

tion and running of a reading center, or even as the person to serve as liaison between the school and the community.

It is noteworthy that the term *supervisor* was more or less purposely lost in the job descriptions between the original concept in the thirties and the more recent discussions of the need for personnel trained in reading at the secondary level. It is entirely reasonable. We suggest that the word *remedial* follow the same route to oblivion. What is essential to the improvement of reading at the junior and senior high school level is an awareness of the nature of the process. A teacher, working side by side with other teachers, can demonstrate and analyze the process, to the benefit of everyone concerned.

The cause of reading must permeate the entire high school atmosphere, and only adequate discussion among equal colleagues can bring about the attainment of this goal. If a reading teacher can help the biology teacher make pages 78-89 of the text into a direct reading activity, the students will gain new insight into the skills they may apply in all other science reading, and the teacher of biology may see ways to make his classroom technique a bit more effective. If a coach can be convinced to recommend a sports biography to a student (perhaps a reluctant reader who admires the coach), a further step toward the true all-school reading program will be taken. The principal too, might be persuaded to look for ways in which he could foster the triple causes—reading to learn, reading for recreation, reading for personal development.

Suppose we describe the reading resource person, as a position, in some detail. As preparation and background for the secondary work, this teacher should have some years of experience as a subject matter teacher. Courses in reading which would help provide the technical expertise might be testing, diagnosis, reading therapy, adolescent literature, and administration of reading programs. (We are assuming that all teaching certificates will include the basic requirement of at least six semester hours in the teaching of reading.)

Job specifications for a *reading resource person* at the secondary level might be as follows:

- a) administers, scores, and interprets standardized survey reading tests
(What seems like dull clerical work here is an important opportunity for the reading resource person to help acquaint teachers with both national and local norms, and to distinguish between rate, vocabulary, and comprehension performances.)
- b) reports to teachers on student reading records
(Again, a means of showing that reading is a complex set of skills

and attitudes. It also allows the content course teachers an opportunity to ask questions without deigning to ask a remedial reading teacher, nor, on the other hand, ask questions of one who casts himself in the role of administrator.)

- c) keeps students informed of their needs for reading practice
(No more challenging situation can be presented to a student than the information that his mental abilities are four or three grades ahead of his reading performance. The reading resource person can compute the reading expectancy of students who are merely drifting, and use the information to appeal to the students' sense of self-competition. The results are quite dramatic, and serve as examples to the less talented, who may then come in for instructional assistance.)
- d) finds and distributes materials related to reading
(It is incumbent on the reading resource person to find and read the latest materials on research in the area. By paraphrasing and adapting, he can offer quite practical and helpful ideas to content course teachers who feel the need for such aid.)
- e) tests incoming individual students as requested by counseling department
(It is inevitable that during the year, in this mobile society, a few students show up at the school with almost no records for placement. It is a valuable service, if the reading resource person can apply a few brief tests such as word, sentence, and paragraph comprehension, to describe a range of reading level and offer some observation of reading difficulties, if any.)
- f) provides materials and organizes reading development programs for students who wish to work in the reading center
(Naturally, this would require some acquaintance with the machinery and kits extant in the field at the pertaining levels. A board of education would most respect a reading resource person who reflected a philosophy of frugality toward gadgets and gimmicks.)
- g) consults with teachers in all content areas on matters of reading
(A reading resource person would have considerable access to the latest ideas on how to teach vocabulary in all subjects, how to use the textbook for small reading drills, and how to vary the lesson to meet the needs of all students. While there is always the chance that philosophies may differ, the reading resource person is hopeful that teachers generally see high school as a place where students are becoming acquainted with their own strengths and weaknesses—not to be mere receptacles of informative data.)

- h) provides information on reading levels of textbooks considered for use or adoption
(The reading resource person would need to be well acquainted with readability formulas, and the developments in this area. He might try the Fry, the Cloze, and make comparisons.)
- i) works with librarian in obtaining materials relative to reading improvement for library (and professional) shelves
(Popular books about how to study or how to read faster are easy to find. More important are a few books of a more technical nature for teachers—the psychology of teaching reading—how to identify the creative student, etc.)
- j) demonstrates the teaching of reading to new teachers, shows materials, discusses reading skills, etc.
- k) experiments with materials, surveys student reading habits and makes reports on results obtained
- l) coordinates efforts with teachers on reading research projects in the classroom
- m) prepares and submits regular progress reports to administration
(This is a last-but-not-least item. It comes under the heading of tying up the loose ends, and letting the administration see that a viable program is under way. Preparing an accurate and comprehensive report is the most effective way of educating administrators regarding the work being accomplished *and* the needs for the future. The report is, finally, the means of motivating the rest of the faculty, just as we teach students to look at their progress now and then—it helps to build success.)