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READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

ACCOUNTABILITY IN READING AT THE
HIGH SCHOOL LEVEL

Kenneth VanderMeulen

The scene described below is typical and is probably taking place in many schools at this time of year. The scene is so frequently played that almost everyone can recognize himself in one role or another. A word of caution—keep an open mind throughout the episode.

A mother is standing in the doorway of the principal's office after an evening of visiting with her son's teachers. She is emotional and her voice has risen a full octave and several decibels. "Let me ask you, then, why should John's grades drop so drastically when he reaches high school? He was a good student in grade school and in junior high. I don't understand why the high school teachers feel he is loafing and failing to read his texts. That's what they told me. He was always a pretty good reader. Just what is it that happens in high school?"

Understandably, the principal is hard pressed to furnish an answer to this set of questions. He parries with his own question as to whether or not Mrs. Smith has talked to John's counselor. "Why should I do that?" Mrs. Smith retorts. "The counselor has to say whatever the teachers have told him."

The principal chooses to ignore this gross misconception, and tells her that he will look into the matter and give her a call as soon as possible. He writes something on his desk pad and accompanies Mrs. Smith to the door of the school at the end of the Parents Open-House Evening.

In the next day or two, the principal finds time to ask the teachers about John. The administrator is a good listener, and organizes each teacher's appraisal into his notes with care. He checks with the counselor and learns that John's marks have indeed been moving downward in the ninth and tenth grades. He further discovers that John had above-average percentiles on standardized tests as recently as a year ago. Calling Mrs. Smith to report that he had nothing constructive to add to the situation was not an easy task for the principal. From all appearances, he told her, it looked as if John were not doing his homework assignments, not listening to brief lectures and demonstrations, not reviewing for tests, and probably not doing much reading any-

where. At that point the conversation was literally taken over by Mrs. Smith who made some charges against the school, the administrator, the teachers, and the counselors. She stated in essence that John was still the same boy in grade ten that he was when he was making above-average marks in sixth and seventh grades. Since nothing had happened to John at home to take away any of his desire to succeed, and since no one “loses the ability” either to read or to study once he has learned how, someone or something at the school must have turned John into a non-achieving youngster.

We will spare the reader the rest of the details, at least of that diatribe. However, we shall have to come back to details with meticulous care as we attempt to put this whole matter into proper perspective. Details are what make up this case, and other similar cases, of reading and related study problems.

If we look closely at the situation of a tenth grader whose marks indicate immediate attention is necessary, we are considering a whole person. Yet, at the secondary level, the number of factors which may be influencing the performance of the student to depress his efforts and results are numerous. Neither the parent nor the administrator can safely assume the causes lie in one or two areas, but because the recent use of the word *accountability* has become rampant, the administrator tends toward the defensive and the parent seems more ready to accuse.

Who is responsible? Naturally, the young man himself might shed some light on what changes have taken place in his attitude or habits. Perhaps the concept of accountability could begin with conversations between student and counselor at the outset of the school year, and would encourage the student to establish some realistic goals. Accountability may begin with an adolescent's self-assessment, an honest look at his present situation, and a statement about directions he is setting for himself. Counselors can be of inestimable value in these cases, helping young people to determine their “latitude and longitude”—that they may be a little surer of the course. Brief inventories of reading, writing, interests, and achievement are readily available; letting students discuss the outcomes and interpret the results is frequently as helpful and revealing as taking the test. If, however, the results of a standardized test come back as tapes from a computer printout and are merely attached to something called the permanent record, few of the above-mentioned values can possibly be realized.

The responsibilities of helping students to develop their reading and study skills is not borne alone by the counselor or reading teacher. When accountability is discussed, and reading and mathematics are

the areas in which measurement is to be made, all teachers may see the role they can play in sharing the job. Insofar as reading is needed in all of the courses, each teacher should look for ways in which reading proficiency can be improved in the content work. Until very recently, high school teachers turned a deaf ear to the idea that "every teacher is a teacher of reading." Now it is more generally recognized that the effective and successful student is a young person who has been taught to use his reading abilities to solve problems, satisfy needs, and build insight. It is moreover understood that the effective reader is not the result of an inspiring English class, or any other single academic experience. We are beginning to see that the process of producing a self-reliant reader starts in the home, is continued in the primary grades, and depends upon the support and continued efforts of the middle grade and secondary teachers. Nor does the process stop there. We know now that refining and polishing the skills of reading is a life-long matter. But here we are referring only to the segment of secondary grades.

It is indeed easy (and frequent in incidence) for a high school teacher to look at the ceiling when mention is made of accountability, and say something like this: "What am I supposed to be accountable for, when the student comes to my class and doesn't pull his weight with the text or the class discussions or the unit tests? We don't do that much reading in my classes that he needs to be a super-student, but he ought to be able to think in English and comprehend the common idiom." Again, the problem stems from the fact that we tend to be working with only a facet of the whole, and for only a limited period of time. No teacher wishes to assume accountability for the many factors that make up reading performance if he can influence only a few of those factors by his own efforts.

But this is to look at the matter from the wrong angle. If one asks himself, "What can I do to make every person who attends my class a more effective reader in my subject?" one is sure to turn up many ideas for improvement and more effective study by all the John Smiths in all of the classes. By keeping oneself aware of the needs of those students whose reading skills are only fair, the teacher can do a great deal to build success into almost every assignment. Some of the changes which might be made are these:

1. Call attention to a limited number of paragraphs to read, finding other ways of presenting the remaining material in the passage. If students are able to accomplish the reading of that which is best

learned in this manner, they will be more inclined to read their assignments regularly.

2. Look ahead in each assignment to see where the less able readers may have difficulty, and have the class assist you in explaining and defining the potential trouble spots.
3. Give the reasons or the purposes for reading a passage as a search for answers or solutions, thus building a habit of active reading in students who may have become used to watching TV passively.
4. Encourage students to develop the habit of reflecting on ideas presented in print by providing time during class for short discussions on matters just read. This will establish a valuable trend toward reflection on ideas presented in print.
5. Have the better readers participate in the discussions with the poorer or slower students, rather than fall into the old pattern of dividing classes into groups based on ability.
6. Allow some time for browsing among the several levels of materials you keep in the classroom to give students experience with other authors' views and treatment of the same material as your course covers.
7. Try to keep in mind at all times that the student will do more work of better quality if he believes he can succeed; therefore his confidence and self-image should be built up rather than eroded by harsh judgments and disparaging remarks.
8. When parts of a reading assignment are to be read aloud in class, always allow the poorer readers enough advance notice of what they are to read to afford time for preparation. Since reading aloud invariably arouses a certain amount of emotionality, the readers should not be caught without their confidence.
9. While all assignment making should include emphasis on technical terms and new concepts to be met in reading, special note must be taken of the vocabulary needs of the slower student. Unless the reader is given help in context clues and dictionary use in advance of reading the lesson, the entire assignment may be wasted on those students.
10. Before making a reading assignment, think over carefully what kind of pre-reading knowledge or experience background would be helpful to the students. Build this background so that the actual reading will be more meaningful.

Teachers generally tend to hold themselves accountable for teaching the material in their course content, and most high school instructors become a bit defensive when the subject of outside measuring

standards is broached. What is needed is a reminder that what is true in the physical world is true in the world of the tenth grader—the whole is equal to the sum of its parts. Parents must recognize the importance of their supportive role in making the student effective and successful, and they must realize that anxiety over grades or other matters may block adequate concentration and memory. Administrators must not yield to the tendency to regard students as number-problems they must solve; rather, they should provide activities and programs which will foster emotional maturity through student-held responsibilities. As mentioned previously, counselors can contribute to student growth through conversations, replacing the sterile concept of formal “interviews.”

Thus, when we return to the case of John Smith, an average high schooler, we may see that assigning a single cause for his academic slump would be oversimplification. We might find physiological changes (periods of rapid growth, the onset of puberty), psychological changes; changes in peer-groups or other environmental factors which exert tremendous pressures on an individual student. We are most interested, though, in those environmental factors which concern the atmosphere and climate of learning set by teachers in the classrooms, especially those courses which require reading skills. If John’s teachers were friendly and encouraging, if they sought ways to make reading assignments capable of being accomplished for agreed-upon ends, and if they were cognizant of John’s reading strengths and weaknesses, those teachers should feel totally satisfied that they constituted a set of *plus* factors in John Smith’s pursuit of academic growth.