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# WHO SAID THREE IS A CROWD?

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The education of American children appears to be at crisis stage in the nation today. Turmoil and confusion about what to teach, to whom and where, reflect the general concerns of a society in the midst of a social and economic re-evaluation process. Voters are rejecting pleas to support a public school system which many feel is failing in its role as educator to all children. Perhaps nowhere else is the criticism felt so sharply as in the area of reading instruction. Because so many pupils leave the elementary school and even the senior high school with less than adequate reading skills, school systems everywhere are taking a close hard look at the reading programs and the reading teachers in their schools in an effort to determine why these failures have occurred. Since learning to read is an integral part of learning in all areas, any improvement in the total education of children must, therefore, include improvement in the teaching of reading.

Where the public schools are in trouble, teacher preparation programs feel the backlash. As teacher educators, we must evaluate our programs and practices in light of the kinds of teacher competencies which are needed in the future if children are truly to be educated. It seems to be a human condition that in times of crisis, we are most vulnerable to extremes of action. Witness the confusion all around us.

New approaches and systems of reading appear at a rapid rate. Some authors and publishers set to work to revise popular and current material. Often such revisions were limited to changing the skin color of a few characters, changing a few background pictures, and incorporating into their manuals some ideas for working with the gifted, the disadvantaged, and the minority groups.

Some authors concentrated on the reading act itself and tried to break this down into small steps of progression which needed to be mastered before next steps could be taken. Some publishers and authors looked at reading in various parts of the world and performed some rather neat transplants. There are those who feel that children start to read too soon in this country and others who feel that the child's reading ability will be doomed unless he starts reading during the first few months of life. We contract for performance gains in one quarter and "de-school" in another. Highly controlled programmed

learning is evangelized by some as *the answer* for all, while at the same time completely non-directive free schools are proclaimed as *the way* by others. Because it seemed to the authors that in the hubbub of choosing, the individual child and his needs were somehow being overshadowed by the dogmatism of the approach to be used, it was felt that a college level course designed to prepare teachers of reading must necessarily focus on the child to be taught.

With this basic premise in mind, the authors came together as a team in the fall of 1970 to teach three sections of the undergraduate reading methods course. Reading was viewed by the team as a developmental process which involved the whole child and the teacher in a classroom environment designed to promote individual maximum growth in learning.

The team approach seemed particularly appropriate to this task for several reasons.

1) Each of the individuals involved brought a slightly different background of skills to the program, including teaching experiences at various levels of elementary education, knowledge of child development and learning theory, and clinical experience in the diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties. The pooling of these skills in a unified program brings to the students a more comprehensive approach to the teaching of reading than any one of the instructors could provide.

2) The experience of often hearing three points of view on a particular subject is seen as a healthy condition for the intellectual growth of the students.

3) Teaming as an approach to teaching is becoming more widely used in the schools. Being involved in a team-taught course can prove to be an excellent way for potential teachers to evaluate the process as one in which they might someday choose to participate.

Several decisions made early in the planning stage appear to be significant. It was decided that a deep commitment to team teaching was an imperative. To this group, team teaching meant planning and working as a team with all members being present in the large group sessions at all times. It was decided that no instructors teaching independent courses in reading should be penalized by having additional sections of larger groups because of this team experience. It was recognized that University students differ from each other and need sustained help and evaluation by at least one staff member who knows them reasonably well. For these reasons it was agreed that the team of instructors would meet from ninety to one hundred students in the

large sessions and that each would be responsible for one third of the students for purposes of clarifying confusions, guiding readings and individual projects, working with individuals, and for final grade assignments.

Before the semester began, the team members met to plan the course objectives and to outline ways of implementing them. The specific topics to be covered included, among others, reading readiness, cognitive development, approaches to teaching reading, classroom organization, reading in the content areas, evaluation procedures, parent conferences, and the causes and diagnosis of reading difficulties.

Perhaps the over-riding objective of the course, as seen by the team, was to help the students to develop a sensitivity to the individual needs of children learning to read and to foster flexibility in teaching strategies so that these needs might be met in a realistic way.

As the course topics were outlined, areas of responsibility were assumed by each instructor and a tentative schedule was arranged for the semester. The team was unanimously committed to the idea that flexibility in timing and in the content of material to be discussed was also important to this program if the individual needs of college students were to be met. Since all three instructors were present at the large group sessions, there were those "teachable moments" when one or another of the team would see the need to extend a concept or to involve the group in an unplanned activity that would reinforce a previous learning. Obviously, such a teaching philosophy demanded not only flexibility of programming, but flexible people as well. Frequent meetings were held throughout the semester in order to evaluate the progress of the course and to make changes where necessary.

As the team approaches its fifth semester of teaching, some informal student and staff appraisals indicate that it is desirable to continue and refine this organizational and teaching plan. Some of the advantages suggested by students follow:

- \*The stimulation that comes from having three instructors with different teaching styles.
- \*The experience of having three people with different specializations attacking the same problem.
- \*The feeling that you can get help from any one of three instructors.
- \*The breadth of learning about reading—an individual instructor sometimes spends most of his time (and ours) on his own pet method.

\*The excitement of interacting in the large groups—helps get rid of inhibitions.

\*The fun of having the team members argue with each other.

\*The warm, close feeling developed in the small group where issues can be discussed more fully and where people know each other.

As far as the team members are concerned, they feel:

\*That they are learning tremendous things from each other concerning content, materials, and teaching style.

\*That they are becoming increasingly aware of important issues in reading which they may not have been fully aware of prior to this experience.

\*That they feel support from the other members of the team and get better feed-back about what they really did or did not accomplish.

\*That three people can keep more aware of new ideas and materials and keep each other and the students more up to date.

\*That the students appear more alert and eager to learn.

This certainly does not mean that the team has all the answers about preparing teachers to teach reading or, for that matter, about how children learn to read. It does mean that for this team of instructors and for these students there appears to be an excitement, a breadth of knowledge, and a real involvement that was not as apparent in their classes, or in themselves, prior to this experience.

Our team is constantly searching for improvement. We think our students are finding that three heads are better than one. Who said three is a crowd?