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TEACHING READING IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

"Readiness and the All-School Reading Program"

Kenneth VanderMeulen

In the following paragraphs are listed a number of ideas for bringing attention to reading in the school. As the admen say, if you have their attention, half the battle is won. This article is directed to the typical teacher of reading in a school where not enough such attention is being paid to the cause of reading improvement. Our conviction is that the teacher of reading cannot accomplish much by working with a few students at a time in developmental or corrective reading. Our suggestions are meant to encourage the one or two members of the faculty who are able to cling to the goal of an all-school reading program while employing some of these ideas in an ascending or cumulative manner. They, the ideas, require more tenacity than expertise, more faith than knowledge, and more *light touch* than heated discussion.

Many points of similarity exist between bringing a secondary student along to an attitude of wanting to improve his reading and bringing in a high school's faculty to a point of readiness for a developmental reading program. In both cases there is a reluctance which uses the excuse "I don't know just how" or "I'm really not qualified." In both cases there is a natural hesitation which doubts the efficacy of change, and only a number of convincing gestures on the part of the driving force will bring the decision around. In both cases it seems easier to adopt an attitude of tokenism, of saying "this will do okay for now," instead of taking the larger steps of gearing for action. Just as the secondary student seems to have sluggishness which resists the vision of a better future through greatly improved reading practices, high school faculties have their not-so-quiet voices which speak for leaving things alone and rejecting the jump into what "might not be any better."

Any teachers who have worked with reluctant readers and attitudinal problems know that changing opinion requires approaches other than argument. Nor can you change the ideas of your colleagues by attempting to show their ideas to be wrong or out-of-date. Nor

can you base an entire program in a school on the singlehanded efforts of one person. A program is people. A reading program rests on the understanding participation of a large enough proportion of the faculty so that its forward motion is fairly well assured from the outset. The adamant resistors can eventually be drawn in by the centripetal force of the buzzing, whirring success of its motion. There is nothing quite so unifying in human nature as a good start in a group program.

Therefore, it is necessary to bring the school off its immobility and onto some activity in this direction. Exact timing is extremely important here. Just as knowing when to plant seeds is part of the basic skill of farming, knowing when to take certain steps toward establishing the all-school reading program is fundamental. If a school is to bring any program into existence, heavy-handedness on the part of the administration would cripple it just as surely as failure to move toward squarely facing the problems precludes all solutions.

It is important to recognize the many factors that influence the school climate, just as it is important to recognize factors which influence a student's performance in reading. Apathy in some teachers, suspicion of anything smacking of academic theory, changes superimposed by the "front office," generally poor communication, lack of funding—there are many more such negative forces that may operate to break down the processes of growth and improvement.

But the positive force of one enthusiastic and dedicated person can generate enough power to bring about a new program. Most of the effective all-school reading programs now in existence are the results of efforts by a few faculty members who were careful in their leadership and adept at planting ideas. Instruction in manuals and texts to the effect that *all* faculty members should be involved is excellent advice, but that is not a good *first* step. The stage of involving everyone must be preceded by the kind of groundwork one does to prepare any group of adults anywhere for making some decisions of consequence. A nucleus of two or three teachers may undertake to do the necessary constructive work, without making public speeches or going before the Board of Education. A few such thoughts, based on practical experience, follow.

First, the reading teacher must work with other teachers in a supportive, cooperative role. If he allows himself to remain the sole benefactor of students least likely to succeed academically, he places himself on the fringe as a satellite to the educational action. Logic notwithstanding, teachers of subject matter courses see themselves as working

with more important material than the teacher who works with the process of learning that material. Thus, the reading teacher needs to provide other teachers with a practical kind of assistance that demonstrates the effectiveness of reading aids.

One reading teacher talked about reading with the auto-mechanics teacher, and, upon hearing how seriously deficient students were in comprehension of the text concepts, offered to see what he could do to help. A few weeks later the auto-mechanics man was telling the metal shop and drafting teachers that the “remedial reading person” had made a cassette tape for him on how to study the chapter on differential gears that helped even his “dummies” pass the unit test. It was a matter of reading the sub-heads and organizing information.

Another area of activity is the collection of data. While all schools have testing programs and all students may have sufficient information about them collected in a central place, it is generally not put into usable forms for specific help in instruction. The reading teacher should make an effort to find student records with the widest range between reading *performance* and *expectancy*. (We’re using the Bond and Tinker formula of $IQ \times \text{yrs. in school} + 1$.) If, for instance, a tenth grader’s reading is measured at eighth grade level, and his mental ability is regarded as normal, we might then be able to say his reading expectancy is about eleventh grade. Any youngster who is approached with such data, showing that with reasonable effort and help his reading performance could be brought up three years, will give the matter serious consideration. The reading teacher may soon report that several students sacrificed their study hall period to come to the reading center and that they brought their reading level up one or two years in a matter of weeks. This is not unrealistic—the dramatic improvement usually results from student insight into his *own* situation and the self-motivation leap that follows.

If the reading teacher wants to build momentum on the student appeal, he might organize a readers’ club. The rule variations for membership are unlimited, and anything the club does for and during meetings may enhance the chances for more reading in the school. One group in Des Plaines, Illinois, made the importance of reading obvious by placing status on the number of books read. Another club became a service group and sold paperbacks to other students in the cafeteria during noon hour. A portable display stand was supervised by club members who took turns talking about books with their classmates. Title choices were made from the National Council of Teachers of English approved list. The sponsor enjoyed conversations with

other teachers as he elicited title suggestions from members of departments other than English.

Cooperation with the librarian is always wise if not mandatory. The reading teacher and librarian may be able to advance the cause of reading among the faculty by providing a social occasion—an after-school coffee, the introduction of a local writer or newsman, a display of new acquisitions, or perhaps a demonstration of a reading device or study approach. Even a visit from a publisher's representative might be cause for inviting faculty members to the library. Get together, talk, and let them know you. The reading teacher should not let go a single opportunity to talk about study methods, making reading assignments, or previewing a text. Avoid trying to "teach" teachers, however, at all costs. The reading person presents himself as a source of ideas or help or material, but never instruction.

If and when other faculty members indicate a receptiveness to the idea of learning more about reading in the content areas, you can find an "expert" to say what you would say. That may seem insincere; however, we must realize the truth in "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and his own home." It is fair; you may be the expert who travels to the other town someday.

If in-service classes are warranted, seek financial help to any extent from the board of education; if the plan is simply to meet to discuss reading, you will of course play a much more active role.

Many projects the reading teacher undertakes are meant to lead the thinking, but they must not be blatant in approach. A bulletin board may be a way to work with certain students who are less approachable in other circumstances. Discussions with administrators to loosen funds for professional books in the faculty lounge might serve to make administrators more aware of your goals. Showing or demonstrating certain reading materials to other teachers may not produce any visible effects, but impressions alone can sometimes be helpful. Writing and submitting brief articles to local or metropolitan papers will always result in more attention and additional understanding when the proper time for some major decisions comes.

One area for action which must not be overlooked as a source of help is publishing companies. Let some such offices know the direction of your push, write to a few well-known publishers of educational materials on your school letterhead stationery. Use such a candid statement as "I am looking for materials to help me build a reading program in the high school," and you will not have long to wait. One young reading teacher received many reading bulletins which he cir-

culated among colleagues, until many of his fellow teachers were conversant with such terms as readability, cloze, i.t.a., fixations, and regressions. They also understood his aversion to the term “speed reading,” and talked about *skimming* or rate of comprehension instead.

While it may be early in the decade for expecting fruition of the ambitious plans of the National Reading Center, one may gain some valuable ideas by writing that agency at 1776 Massachusetts Avenue, Washington, D.C., 20036, for listings and brochures. Write your state department of education, stating your needs in a general way. Mining or prospecting, you must check out all possible sources. Materials you collect may not be immediately usable, but it all may fit some time.

Several other small ways in which you may do your own program and the school in general inestimable good are: Set up a tutoring service in which certain secure students you know can help other students who are in academic difficulty, making sure it takes place in your room and under your supervision; work with the English department to survey the needs and levels of students in reading, with the stated purpose of telling students how they stand on local and national norms; make efforts to see that the local library has subscriptions to *The Journal of Reading*, *The Reading Teacher*, *Reading Horizons*, and proceedings from various conferences on reading; watch TV program plans well in advance, and you can be the one who offers reading matter to support various areas of potential student enthusiasm; join the professional organization of your choice and attend some meetings; and—list for the teachers in your school the materials available to help students learn how to read and study better.

One last bit of unprofessional but well intended advice. Make yourself a standout or expert in some small way, something that will bring even a modicum of professional recognition to you. Don't allow yourself to sink into the rut of orderly, dependable, cheerful, but anonymous educational work. If you do whatever you do with a little flair, you will be taken more seriously by your fellow teachers than if you do a commendable job with drudgery. Apply a readability formula and let the social studies department know the level of difficulty of a text they are considering for adoption. Give individual informal reading tests to students who need special help, and give counselors the kind of data they can use with other teachers. Invite students to your classroom to improve phrase reading with a tachistoscope they can make for themselves, if they follow your model. All in all, make your profile a salient feature of the educational skyline—it is tantamount to building a better mousetrap—and it will help you build an all-school reading program in the school.