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Child Development and Language Arts at Aquinas College

By Sister M. Bernetta, O.P.

Aquinas College

Introduction

Effective teaching of reading is a complex job that looks deceptively simple to the casual reader, or even to the University professor who has limited experience in teaching young children. The teaching of reading is over-simplified by the writers for most popular journals. On the other hand, the teaching of reading or being the best reader possible has some analogy to pursuing perfection, we are always only on the way, never at the peak of perfection. Each new insight into the reading process opens up vaster uncharted vistas and seas of wisdom, both as to the art of reading and to the art of teaching reading. Education is a continuous process and so is good, better, and best reading a vital part of all formal and informal education.

Elementary Education at Aquinas College

With the above reflections in mind, Aquinas College has for many years experimented with a block of elementary professional education. In this block, Child Growth and Development becomes the integrating center for the teaching of reading. In the general elementary methods, the primary emphasis is put on reading. The basic principles of reading are a springboard for all the other subjects of the elementary school curriculum.

Therefore, the teaching of reading takes precedence over the other elementary school subjects, and principles and methods learned here will transfer to the other disciplines. Reading has no content of its own but is vital to all content. Even the new mathematics is becoming more and more a language art in which arithmetical sentences (equations) are a vital part of our fast moving scientific age.

Integration in Elementary Education

Because reading is so well integrated in all the language arts and is such a vital part of the elementary professional education block, it is

included not only in “General Methods in the Elementary School” but also in “Principles,” “Child Development,” and “Directed Teaching.”

Observation, Participation, and Student Teaching

Directed Teaching is well integrated in the professional education block provided for elementary teachers. The first observations are group observations and are very carefully planned and followed up by guided group discussion and evaluation, both written and oral. All elementary teachers begin their observation at the nursery school level and go up through the elementary and junior high school levels.

These observations are paralleled by Child Development films, such as: “He Acts His Age;” “Terrible Twos and Trusting Threes;” “Frustrating Fours and Fascinating Fives;” “From the Sociable Six to the Noisy Nine;” and “Nines to Twelves;” “They Grow So Fast;” “The Angry Boy;” “Individual Differences;” “Learning to Understand Children;” and “Stress.” These are the springboard for further reading in this field.

Directed Observation

Directed observation precedes and follows the directed field practice. The first observations of teaching are general, that is, the whole class of student teachers visit in the same classroom at one time. These are followed by written evaluations and oral discussion. Later observations as well as observations after the field teaching are of more an individual nature, according to individual needs and position desired. Observations of special education schools, such as, the blind, deaf, orthopedic, and mentally retarded are a vital part of this program. Experimental plans of the ungraded elementary school, team teaching and air-borne television are also included.

Directed Field Teaching

For about eight weeks directed teaching classes, observation and participation activities are carried on in systematic fashion. Then for six or seven weeks the student teachers are in schools according to their desires as to public, private, parochial or special, for the full day’s work. During this time students are encouraged to participate in all the instructional, intra-curricular, and extra-curricular activities dur-

ing the entire school day as well as the evening school functions. Students are, in most instances, welcomed to faculty meetings, P.T.A. activities and parent-teacher conferences as well as to other activities which are part of a professional teacher's life.

Pre-conferences are held with the supervising teachers as well as a seminar before, during, and near the end of field directed teaching to evaluate and plan for better directed teaching.

All student teachers have individual conferences with the Director of Teacher Education as well as at least two general seminars at Aquinas College on Friday afternoons. For these, outside speakers participate and the persistent problems of the respective classes are discussed and good plans for solutions proposed.

Readiness for Education Semantics

The Reading theory reference and text work is given in gradual complexity, beginning with easier-to-comprehend material of such authors as the works of Dolch, to the more difficult ones by Hildreth and many other authors as the students are ready for difficult sources. Student teachers achieve far more in true understanding if their readiness for educational materials is provided for by easy steps in their undergraduate work in reading theory and practice.

Re-Emphasis on Teaching of Reading

Since the teaching of reading to the pupils of the elementary school is so vital and important, major emphasis is put on reading. During the first part of the work in the block intensified stress and time is given to reading theory and practice. As soon as the students have a sufficient background of a couple weeks' work of about fifty hours of intensive classtime, we parallel our theory classes with student teachers' actual work with children in reading. Boys and girls who attend a nearby parochial school are used for demonstration work. For six weeks during each semester children who have not been taught reading are tested in intelligence and reading readiness by the student teachers under guidance. The Director of Teacher Education then begins the first reading lessons and as soon as the class begins the use of systematic materials, she has the student teachers volunteer to teach beginning reading to this group of children while the class of student teachers observe. A critical discussion and evaluation follow not only

of the class presentation but also of the written planning of the student teacher. So everyone, regardless of his grade choice, learns to teach reading by actual practice from the beginning levels upward. From this nearby parochial school we ask for as many children who are having trouble in reading as we have student teachers. These student teachers tutor a child in remedial reading under direction for fifty minute periods three times a week for six weeks and do very careful planning culminating in a detailed case study.

In this way the student teacher has many opportunities for functional word attack, critical reading discussion, and adequate provision for comprehension and application. It is a test and challenge to motivate these under-achievers in language arts. The results in improvement of all concerned are astounding. Many children really learn to learn and once they have "learning readiness" they really *want* to achieve, and they do.

Personal therapy is of incalculable benefit both to the child being tutored as well as to the student teacher. Student teachers learn what they could do with one student before the individual gets lost in the class. There is a "new look" at each of the wonderful children of God's handiwork in his own uniqueness. Because of constant supervision and help in need these student teachers know when to ask for help and value it highly. Both the child and the tutor learn to concentrate in spite of the proximity and competing work of other tutors and children near them. The child of poor attention habits has to pay attention as he is the only one and has no one else to do the work for him as in an ordinary class or group situation. Taking the child alone brings out his best qualities of personality and workmanship. It is an inspiring experience to see the joy of interest on the faces of boys and girls and their tutors.

For the last lesson in tutoring, the parents are invited for a conference and demonstration lesson. The parents then read the case study and discuss the reading progress and needs of their child with the student teacher. The case studies are then sent to the classroom teacher of the child who was tutored.

Reading Films

A great enrichment to the teaching of reading classes are the films loaned by the Grand Rapids Board of Education on such subjects as,

“A Day in the Life of a Five Year Old;” “How to Use a Reading Readiness Book;” “Skippy and the Three R’s;” “Gregory Learns to Read;” “Individualized Reading Instruction;” and “How to Read a Book.”

The materials for use on the elementary and college levels of the Keystone Tachistoscope program are used. Both the Barnette and Minnesota University college reading improvement materials are used with student teachers according to their personal needs. Filmstrips and records are also used extensively in the teaching of reading.

Visual Seminars

Because of the new advances in visual science and visual training and tenuous relationship toward achievement in reading, we have the services of a fine “Vision Specialist,” Dr. H. L. PreFontaine, O.D., who gives regular seminars to student teachers on vision and its relationship to better reading achievement. New developments and research in this area are watched and studied carefully, such as, the Lions Winter Haven Research being carried on in the elementary schools of Winter Haven, Florida for the past eight years. Here they are working on a course in Perception for the early elementary grades. A very inspiring book in this field is *The Slow Learner in the Classroom* by Newell Kephart, published by Charles E. Merrill Books, Incorporated.

Conclusion

It is difficult to describe what is done in the teaching of reading at Aquinas, but our students feel that when they go out into the field they have some security in this area of knowing where and how to begin with one of the most complex arts and sciences, which is reading. They know that they have much more to learn in this intriguing field of reading. We view reading as a tenuous facet of all knowledge manifest in terms of human growth and development. Effective teaching and learning is a combination of idealism and practicality, of theory and of practice. Good Christian teachers aim to contemplate first and only then, to give to others the fruit of their contemplation.

Sister M. Bernetta, O.P., is Head of the Department of Education, Aquinas College, Grand Rapids. She is a member of the Executive Council of the Michigan Reading Association. One of her latest publications is an article, "Visual Readiness for Reading," in the *Journal of Developmental Reading*. Recently an honorary doctorate from Central Michigan University was conferred upon Sister Bernetta for her many contributions in the field of reading and education.