



Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 7
Issue 4 July 1967

Article 2

7-1-1967

Another Look at Reading and the Teaching of Reading

Melvin L. Miller

Kalamazoo Public Schools, Michigan

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Miller, M. L. (1967). Another Look at Reading and the Teaching of Reading. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 7 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol7/iss4/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



ANOTHER LOOK AT READING AND THE TEACHING OF READING

Melvin L. Miller

KALAMAZOO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In recent years a continuous process of searching, experimenting, exploring, evaluating and revising has been pursued in an effort to achieve a better understanding of and performance in respect to reading instruction. This state of dissatisfaction with the teaching of reading and its achievements is appropriate. This is not because present day methods are inadequate and that present day achievements in reading are insufficient. Possible future developments suggest that our efforts should be even more adequate and the returns even greater; that is, a state of higher expectations in reading instruction should be maintained at all times. Perhaps these expectations should not be unlike those that Somerset Maugham says that American women have for their husbands. In his book, *The Razor's Edge*, Maugham observes that American women look for the perfection in their husbands that English women only expect to find in their butlers. Such a search for perfection in respect to reading instruction should be interpreted as a recognition of the importance of reading to the further education of and in the life of the child.

Unfortunately, some of the present effort to improve reading instruction is characterized more by its fervor than by its perspective. In some respects a salvation through innovation complex prevails. Ill-defined problems, partial solutions and exaggerated claims are not unusual. The distinction between claim and proof is not clearly made. Change is equated with betterment. "New" and "different" by some queer semantics have become synonymous with "better." A running battle between competing positions—positions that are based on differing and conflicting philosophies, psychologies and methodologies—generates more heat than light. The situation may well be explained by an observation of Bertrand Russell to the effect that opinions are never so strongly defended as when the holder is not sure of his position.

Within the local school systems, the conception and operation of the reading program must be kept under constant study and evaluation. The responsibility and problems associated with developing and maintaining a strong program in reading cannot be ignored. Otherwise, the "pat answer," the "ready solution" or the "firmly held opinion" may

usurp local professional responsibility in this respect. Anchors may need to be dropped and compasses brought into play; otherwise, the choice may be to be driven in various directions by shifting winds and currents.

DEVELOPMENT OF AN INCLUSIVE THEORY OF READING

Is our attention to the total field of reading being too much distracted by this vigorous activity on the fringes? If a theoretical base is non-existent or incomplete, suggested solutions proliferate the fringes. Perhaps the first and foremost need is to develop a clear cut, contemporary understanding of what reading really is. This may be the first step to establishing a more accurate perspective of the true and complete goals of reading instruction and the means by which these may be achieved.

The recent accomplishments in mathematics and science had their beginnings in such a setting. Scholars of these fields identified the elements of and established a theoretical construction of the discipline of these fields. In the interest of clarity and efficiency, reading specialists should develop a reading theory comparable in rigor to that of these disciplines. The task will be neither simple nor easy. The complexity of the human individual, the nature of reading, and the many factors which impinge on growth in reading guarantee such. However, such a construction should be forthcoming; otherwise, confusion and desperation in the field of reading may obscure and overcome reason and direction.

This construct of the theory of reading will have to address itself to, among others, at least four matters. Clear, defensible and first positions will have to be taken in these areas:

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| Products | What are the main competencies, results or goals which should be achieved by reading instruction? |
| Processes | What are the defensible processes for the teaching of reading based on knowledge of the nature of children and their growth, the nature of reading and the psychology of learning? |
| Prerequisites | What factors underlying what can be achieved and the way in which it can be achieved must be recognized and accommodated in the organization and operation of the reading program? |
| Procedures | In view of the three above-mentioned areas, what procedures are satisfactory for attaining the goals of reading instruction? |

The redefinition or establishment of this theoretical construct of

reading would provide a context badly needed at the present time. The efficacy and validity of varied innovative practices would be enhanced and gain wider acceptance if they could be related to and incorporated within this larger context. The premises and assumptions underlying present claims might become more apparent. The results of reliable research activity could be fed back into the larger area of reading and thereby become available and usable in the ongoing program. The field of reading would benefit from and at the same time provide direction for such activity.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE LOCAL READING PROGRAM

With this theoretical construct available as a working context, the local school system can better face up to the responsibility and problems associated with providing and maintaining a strong program in reading. Three questions are suggested which may be given initial and continuing attention in establishing and maintaining any strong local reading program:

1. To what conception will the system subscribe in its approach to reading instruction?
2. What are the basic considerations in determining the nature, organization and operation of the system's program in reading?
3. What needed and continuing emphases will be supplied and supported to help each teacher attain her highest professional artistry in the teaching of reading?

In respect to the first question, recognition should be made of the fact that the process of reading is composed of both a perceptual and intellectual component. In some cases, reading is too narrowly conceived as "how to read" and, as a result, is considered only as skill-building and skill-getting. To stop at this point is to deny the pupil the benefits that accrue from the ability to read. Reading is to be further conceived as the process of putting the reader in contact and communication with ideas and of developing the ability to deal with these ideas. Reading should become a vital intellectual tool for the child. Motivation, interest, application and thought must be considered as integral and important to the process of reading. It is not enough to judge the school's program on its ability to enable children to read, as important as this may appear. The program must also be judged on its ability to make reading vital and serviceable in the life of the child, in school and out of school. Through reading he should find satisfaction for his personal, intellectual hunger and be able to use reading to open up the world of ideas, a never-ending

repository.⁷ Perhaps the end results of such a conception will not be unlike those proposed by Aldous Huxley in his contention that "Every man who knows how to read has it in his power to magnify himself, to multiply the ways in which he exists, to make his life full, significant and interesting."

Each school system, within the conception of the meaning and nature of reading, must make its own determination of the appropriate and correct program in respect to its nature, organization and operation. It is questionable whether incidental or spontaneous programs have as much promise of contributing to either pupil growth or the development of teacher competence to the extent that a direct, planned program of instruction has. Structure and sequence is provided in this planned program to assure the development of necessary skills, their practice and application and to achieve true independence in the use of these skills so as to make reading a serviceable instrument in processes of study and thought. This planned program will assure the needed consistency among the school staff, grade levels and school levels so that a supportive and complementary effort and effect will result. A clarity of purpose will exist, a plan of operation will be defined, and a system of priorities established so as to guarantee that student's opportunities for growth are at the maximum and that some protection is afforded to him from the discontinuities that exist and operate negatively in his reading development.

Among other matters that the system will need to consider in determining the nature, the organization and the operation of the reading program, the following may be worthy of attention:

1. Is there a clear and accepted conception of the purpose of reading instruction?
2. Is there a workable plan for relating materials, organization and methods to the purposes of instruction and the operation of the reading program?
3. Does the plan recognize and accommodate the variability and individual nature of a student's capacity and rate of progress in reading?
4. Does the plan provide for the organization for direct reading instruction, for differentiating instruction and for enriching reading instruction?
5. Does the plan provide for the relating and the carrying of reading into all activities of the school day and the school's curriculum?

Variability in capacity and achievement is the inescapable reality of reading instruction. Variability in achievement in reading is in-

evitable; furthermore, good teaching has the effect of increasing the variability of performance. Competency and efficiency in reading instruction is attained by recognizing, accepting and accommodating these facts. If such is the case, teachers must be helped to see the importance of differentiating and enriching instruction. These begin with the assessment and accommodation of a child's capacity for and rate of growth in his developing ability in reading. Readiness and pacing are two of the important and necessary elements of instruction concerned with adjusting the reading program to individual differences and needs. The strength of the reading program and the competency of the teacher will depend on her disposition and ability to make necessary adjustments in materials, methods and organization to such obvious differences as:

- Differences in levels of pupils' ability within the subject;
- Differences in pupils' rate of progress;
- Differences in students' grasp of component skills and the need to reteach to assure their attainment.

Concurrent with adjustments to the variability within individual students there should be an emphasis on the enrichment of reading instruction to insure that it shall attain the larger ends to which it should be directed. This enrichment of reading instruction is concerned with making learning in reading important and useful; that is, carrying learning to the level of application. Pupils are encouraged to use reading as a tool of learning and inquiry, as access to and entry into the world of ideas, to be challenged by them, and to gain increasing control over them. In this context, reading has become at the same time a means to learning and part and parcel of it.

THE TEACHER, THE IMPORTANT PERSONAL ELEMENT IN READING

Good teaching of children is dependent upon more than clear goals and well-organized programs. The teacher is the important personal element which makes the difference. Through the understanding, commitment and performance of the teacher in her best role, conception and program are transformed into fruitful learning for individual children. Perhaps the greatest challenge in the field of reading instruction is to imbue all teachers with a sense of importance of the area, to provide them with the necessary and proper support in their good efforts, and to assist them to grow in understanding and performance.

There is a need to assign the highest priority to the teaching of reading. Good teaching of reading has the most to contribute to the achievement of human potential. Poor teaching of reading results in

a tragic waste of human resources. Good teaching of reading must be a goal for which all teachers strive and by which they are willing to have their competency determined. Continuous personal assessment of efforts in seeking answers to particular questions will reveal the teacher's estimate of the importance of reading in the life of the child and his contribution to the child's best growth:

1. Can children for whom I am responsible read at their optimum level and in an adaptable, purposeful and thoughtful manner?
2. Do children read with interest, zest and as a matter of personal choice?
3. Are the children's choices of materials made at significant and high levels in respect to types and qualities of reading materials?

By consistently and persistently analyzing her performance in the teaching of reading in these respects, the teacher assesses her professional attainments, the possibilities for improvement and the appropriate adjustments to be made in the teaching of reading. Through such a process, she refines and improves her understanding and performance.

The quality of reading programs on the local public school level is, in the final analysis, largely dependent upon the effectiveness of the individual teacher. A great deal of time and effort are usually necessary to develop strong teachers of reading. The pre-service education of teachers in reading, if sufficient, relevant and coordinated, can make a large and initial contribution to this effectiveness. Mary Austin's investigation of the nature and pertinency of pre-service programs for preparing teachers in reading indicated that the quantity and quality of the preparation varied greatly from institution to institution.

Progress in remedying this situation is apparent. More course work in reading is being required. These courses are more realistic in respect to what is happening and will happen in the teaching situation in which the prospective teacher will operate. They are better designed to be preparatory and supportive to the student moving into his student teaching experience with the necessary background and proper perspective. In effect the pre-service program is conceived as an important part of a continuum of preparation and induction of a professional person in which professional courses in reading and the student teaching experience make an initial contribution to the depth of understanding and the skillful performance required for good teaching of reading.

The improvement of reading instruction will continue. Past gains

will be stabilized; new opportunities and approaches will be available for consideration, evaluation and, if feasible, incorporation into the program. A clear, distinct conception of reading and reading instruction will provide the proper environment for such improvement. Local school systems will continue to restudy, modify and refine their programs of reading instruction. The individual teacher will improve her understanding and performance so that her direction of and relationships to children in the learning situation will become increasingly productive and effective. Not only will children be able to read but also children, reading and books will be brought together in meaningful, productive relationships. Reading will become for the child an intellectual tool, available for use in the process of inquiry and learning.