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# PERCEPTIONS OF READING INSTRUCTION

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Reading is a tool for learning in the elementary grades, not simply a subject to be taught. The full implications of this statement are often overlooked by educators. Reading achievement is best conceived as resulting from a developmental learning process which takes place as children move through the elementary grades. Irrespective of the particular method adopted to teach beginning reading, initial emphasis is placed on the acquisition of word attack skills in the primary grades. This emphasis gradually shifts to teaching comprehension and study skills in the intermediate grades. Here pupils encounter an increasing number and variety of reading tasks while reading materials in a widening spectrum of different content areas. Within this context of a broadening elementary curriculum, greater emphasis is placed on independent learning and the independent reading required to achieve this learning. Consequently, pupil success in reading is vital for pupil success in the entire elementary curriculum.

It follows that there exists an obvious need for elementary reading programs to be closely articulated with the developing and changing reading requirements of pupils as they progress through the elementary grades. There is an even more obvious need for close cooperation between teachers and administrators in order to implement reading programs that meet pupil requirements.

Unfortunately, cooperation between teachers and administrators is often inhibited by a basic incompatibility in their respective perceptions of reading instruction. While teachers and administrators generally recognize the need for mutual cooperation in the development and operation of reading programs, teachers tend to view reading in terms of the instructional process involved in the actual teaching of reading. Administrators, on the other hand, usually regard reading from the standpoint of pupil achievement. In this article I wish to examine the nature of differences in teachers' and administrators' perceptions of reading instruction and to delineate the basis for more effective cooperation.

## *Teachers' Perceptions*

Obviously the role of teachers is to teach. Their work involves them directly in the process of facilitating learning. As Karlin states, reading teachers are expected "to translate the objectives [of the reading program] into learning tasks and guide children in mastering them" (1:40). In this way, teachers are in direct contact with the day-to-day learning-to-read process of their pupils.

The role of teachers inevitably leads them to perceive reading in-

struction as a dynamic, multi-dimensional, developmental process. Pupil growth is seen to result from the complex interaction of a multitude of factors including language and concept development, skills development, broadening interests, and enriched affective responses.

Teachers tend to adopt procedures to measure pupils' reading achievement which reflect their process orientation toward reading instruction. These procedures are usually informal, and their nature has been described by McCracken:

A Teacher gives an informal reading inventory each time she asks a child to read an assignment, each time she asks a child to write, each time she sends a child to the library, each time she discusses with a child the book he has read, each time she talks to a child (2 :273).

In short, teachers, while directly engaged in the process of teaching reading, generally rely on informal observations for the assessment of pupil progress.

#### *Administrators' Perceptions*

Administrators have been described as "facilitators" of reading rather than specialists (3) and their role has been variously defined as giving "aid and comfort" to teachers (4), providing for the improvement of classroom instruction (5), and becoming concerned with reading curriculum development (6). The common factor in these descriptions is that administrators are one step removed from the actual process of teaching reading. While they are responsible for the quality of reading instruction, their involvement in this instruction is removed from the classroom by the nature of their role.

The distance tends to color administrators' perceptions of reading instruction. Rather than seeing reading instruction as a dynamic, multidimensional learning process, administrators are inclined to perceive reading mainly in terms of measured pupil achievement. Administrators often ask "how much" rather than "how" pupils have learned. This measurement orientation is reflected in a dependence on standardized test scores to provide evidence of pupil growth in reading and in a tendency to overlook the underlying teaching and learning process which these scores reflect.

#### *Problems and Solutions*

The divergence of teachers' and administrators' perceptions of reading instruction reflects a failure by both groups to consider reading instruction in a systematic and comprehensive fashion. By viewing reading instruction primarily in terms of the teaching process involved, and by relying on the informal and often incidental assessment of pupil progress, teachers are in danger of becoming preoccupied with the multitude of activities concerned with teaching reading at the expense of determining the true extent of pupil achievement. If teachers fail to see the systematic measurement of pupil achievement as a legitimate and necessary component of the instructional

process, they are in danger of losing direction in their teaching. They will be unable to determine their success in realizing their instructional objectives and will therefore remain insensitive to pupils' needs for corrective help if these needs arise. In order to avoid this problem, the measurement of pupil achievement must accompany teaching in order to ensure the kind of accountability which effective teaching demands.

The measurement of pupil achievement must be seen as the third stage in an instructional sequence that involves the initial determination of instructional objectives and the subsequent teaching toward these objectives. Instructional objectives should be decided upon and accepted by all teachers and administrators concerned with the reading program before instruction begins. Objectives which are somehow discovered after they have been incidentally achieved by pupils either before or after instruction begins must be viewed with caution.

The actual teaching of reading mediates between the determination of instructional objectives and the measurement of pupil achievement of these objectives. Effective teaching requires the implementation of instructional strategies specifically designed to bring about predetermined instructional objectives. It also requires the selection and development of appropriate instructional materials.

The accurate measurement of pupil achievement necessarily proceeds directly and logically from the initial determination of instructional objectives and the subsequent teaching aimed at attaining these objectives. Only in this way will the measurement of reading achievement determine what pupils have actually learned. Careful determination of objectives and diligent teaching toward these objectives are futile activities if the deliberate measurement of pupil achievement of these objectives is not undertaken.

The manner in which measurement is undertaken demands caution, however. Even if a valid concept of reading instruction could be based solely on formal measurement, the limitations of current standardized reading tests make an exclusive dependence on measurement by these instruments impractical. Standardized reading tests generally reflect simplistic conceptualizations of the reading process: they tend to concentrate on the more easily measured aspects of reading achievement, particularly word attack skills measured in isolation through the use of multiple-choice questions, and literal-level thinking skills. Another shortcoming of standardized tests is their failure to measure small increments of growth in reading achievement thereby depriving more slowly progressing pupils of motivation and a sense of success. Neither do standardized tests measure the affective growth of children in reading—the development of taste, enjoyment, motivation, and interest. All these must be objectives for effective reading instruction, yet they are not usually measured by standardized tests.

The most serious shortcoming of standardized tests is their frequent lack of validity. Often these tests do not reflect the instructional objectives set and pursued by teachers, especially when these objectives have been developed to meet the particular needs of children in specific educational settings. Moreover, these tests commonly fail to measure reading skills and

abilities in the way in which they were taught. Very often the tasks demanded of pupils on standardized tests are not presented in the same way by the test as they are by teachers when teaching these skills. Pupils become confused and their performance fails to represent the status of their reading achievement. In this way, standardized tests frequently do not measure the process of learning along with the outcomes of learning.

Given the shortcomings of standardized reading tests coupled with the necessity for the systematic assessment of pupil achievement, an eclectic approach to measurement is required. Whenever possible, standardized tests should be adopted when they closely correspond to the instructional objectives and teaching methodology of the programs in which they are used. In this way, the accurate measurement of pupil reading achievement within the limitations imposed by these tests is provided. At the same time, however, the limitations of these tests demand the adoption of less formal measures of pupil achievement. Informal teacher-made tests will be used in the classroom to provide direct, though less scientifically controlled, indications of pupil achievement on a day-to-day basis. It is this combination of formal and informal measurement that will provide teachers and administrators with the most sensitive assessment of pupil progress in reading.

### *Conclusion*

Obstacles to the planning and development of effective elementary reading programs are implicit in an exclusive acceptance of either teachers' or administrators' perceptions of reading instruction. Closing the gap between teachers' and administrators' perceptions requires that both sides expand their points of view. These perceptions are complementary. Together they form a comprehensive view of reading instruction, while individually they give only half the picture.

Both process and measurement are integral parts of reading instruction, but each must be informed by the other. It is vital that the systematic measurement of pupil achievement be made in terms of the instructional objectives and teaching methods adopted for the reading program. Teachers' perception must focus not only on the instructional process involved in the teaching of reading, but also on the systematic measurement of pupil responses at each successive stage of learning. Without systematic measurement, the assessment of pupil success in achieving reading program objectives will remain at best incidental and intuitive. Conversely, administrators must broaden their perceptions of reading instruction to include not only the formal measurement of reading achievement, but also a fuller understanding of the instructional process as the means through which pupil achievement is determined and through which achievement may be observed and assessed. Teachers and administrators must assume partnership roles in order to establish cooperative goals for more effective reading instruction, and to develop greater mutual understanding of their respective roles in attaining these goals.

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