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WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

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Scene: A workroom in an elementary school where we find two teachers, Mrs. Smith and Miss Jones, discussing the events of the day.

Miss Jones: "During my break this morning I noticed you seemed to be having less trouble with your reading lesson."

Mrs. Smith: "How right you are- I had been having some difficulty with the teaching of comprehension skills in my middle group, but I seem to have found the answer."

Miss Jones: "That's great — but how and where did you find this information?"

Mrs. Smith: "I knew my background in the teaching of comprehension skills was weak, so I quickly reviewed my last several years of *The Reading Teacher, Journal of Educational Research,* and *Harvard Educational Review.* These gave me some valuable insights into the problem, but I was still unsure of what course of action to follow. I then went to the local university and checked the ERIC files and the most recent copies of *Dissertation Abstracts.* One study seemed promising until I noticed a problem with the selection of the sample population . . ."

(Fade out.)

This brief scene illustrates one teacher's attempt to solve a classroom reading question through the use of existing research. Yet, if we are candid, most would probably agree this portrayal is an unrealistic description of the problem solving approach used by the average teacher. What we are confronting here is the dilemma of implementation— how can the results of reading research be utilized in a meaningful way by those who are given the responsibility of teaching children?

Why the Research-Practice Gap?

Many possible reasons could be identified as to why reading research seems to be having such little effect on current teaching practices. Frequently, both those doing the research and those who are to apply the results in their classrooms seem not to understand the aims, limitations, or even professional language used by the other group. The researcher views the practitioners as provincial, conservative, and unwilling or unable to incorporate into their teaching even the most obvious results of reading research. In rebuttal, "Many decision makers see educational researchers as the intellectuals, the eggheads of the educational profession; a group of

rear echelon soldiers enjoying their privileges but providing little help for the front line troops, the teachers." (Gallagher, 1975, p. 13).

This breakdown in communication is perhaps most apparent when discussing the areas of relevancy and applicability. Teachers often believe most current reading research has little relation to the problems they must solve each day in the real world of their classrooms. Instead of theory or generality they want specific answers which are easily obtainable and can be implemented despite lack of time, materials, and professional knowledge of how to put them to work in class.

The Change Agent

In attempting to deal with the dissemination and effective utilization of research findings, increased interest has been directed to the activities associated with those designated as change agents or linkers. According to Carlson, (1965), the role of these persons can be defined as one which ". . . influences the advocacy and introduction of innovations into practice" (p. 4). An example of a noneducational system which historically has relied on the use of change agents has been agriculture with its dependence on the county extension agent. These persons were responsible for bringing to the local farmer, in the most usable format, the latest research findings on crop and livestock development.

In contrast, education has never had as clearly a defined person to transmit new knowledge from the researcher to the practitioner — this despite the fact that some of these linking roles have traditionally been carried on through advanced university training, in-service programs, and research findings conveyed by journals, textbooks, and library retrieval systems.

Guba (1968) has identified a taxonomy of six activities which he suggests an educational change agent or linker could use in bringing to a practitioner the results of current research. They include telling, showing, helping, involving, training, and intervening (p. 48). While this division is a particularly useful organizational pattern, a major problem is identifying the person or persons in most local school districts who would be willing and able to assume this responsibility.

One possible solution might be found within the existing educational organizations of most districts. There are persons currently teaching who because of their interest and training in the area of reading education might very likely accept the role of change agent. As most schools have the services of a reading specialist, this teacher is in a primary position to encourage the dissemination of new reading knowledge to his or her peers primarily, in the sense of having basic understanding of conditions and problems unique to their own teaching situation. In addition, the teaching staff with which the local reading teacher works may be much more receptive to recent reading developments coming from a person they know rather than from another source.

It is important to note the context in which the reading teacher becomes a change agent for the reading program. This should not be thought of as a

teacher/pupil relationship, but rather one between colleagues. The object of the linker's role is not necessarily to point out the flaws and mistakes in what others are doing in their teaching of reading, but instead to share new information and research findings concerned with common problems and interests.

The degree to which a particular reading teacher may be successful in bringing new ideas into the reading curriculum is largely the result of factors such as available time, professional training, and personality variables. While some of these problems may seem formidable, this should not rule out a modest beginning. The results of even a limited effort on the part of one reading teacher may have significant results in determining the eventual consequences of their total reading program.

Suggestions for Implementation

The following guidelines are listed here as only general descriptions of activities which local reading teachers might consider in bringing the results of language arts research to a teaching staff. The previously mentioned diffusion taxonomy developed by Guba (1968) is used as an organizational basis for these suggestions. Each suggestion can easily be modified or expanded depending on local teaching conditions and problems.

1. *Telling.* These activities are often considered to be of least importance because of their informal nature but frequently are the most effective due to the personal interaction required between teachers.

Share information gathered from recently published professional books, journals, and other written sources on the teaching of reading skills.

Report on the findings of reading research presented at national meetings and suggest implications for the local instructional program.

Recommend sources of new supplementary reading material and their appropriate use in the classroom.

2. *Showing.* Suggested activities listed here involve the change agent in demonstrating through a variety of approaches recent developments in the area of reading instruction with the classroom teacher as primarily an observer.

Invite other teachers to visit your class when reading activities of interest to them are being presented.

Prepare bulletin boards and other material displays reflecting new reading concepts and ideas.

Demonstrate current approaches to evaluation of reading skills with particular emphasis on the importance of these techniques for classroom teachers.

3. *Helping.* Helping includes those situations in which the change agent works directly with the teacher in the classroom on the basis of a specific indicated need of that practitioner.

When invited, visit classrooms to teach demonstration lessons presenting the material in a manner which will aid the teachers in improving their own reading programs.

Assist the classroom teacher in developing a remedial program which

reflects recent knowledge on grouping, material selection, evaluation, etc.

Provide specific information on current research related to a particular classroom reading problem.

4. *Involving.* Involving brings the teacher and the change agent together to work on a common problem as a team.

In cooperation with the classroom teacher introduce new reading methods and materials.

Suggest changes in the current classroom reading curriculum based on both formal and informal testing procedures administered by both the teacher and the change agent.

5. *Training.* Training includes most of the techniques presented but differs as to the degree of formal commitment.

Act as liaison representative between the local school and university staff in the development and planning of reading in-service activities based on the needs of the teachers.

Be willing to participate in PTA meetings and other community groups explaining the reading program of the school.

6. *Intervening.* Intervening consists of those activities which most directly reflect the interests and partiality of the change agent.

Take an active role on reading textbook selection committees.

Make your opinion known to the administration about the school's current reading curriculum and other related problems such as priorities on purchase of new materials, etc.

Should these guidelines be implemented, perhaps the opening scene might sound this way as Mrs. Smith responds to Miss Jones about the problem in teaching comprehension skills:

> Mrs. Smith: "I knew my background in the teaching of comprehension skills was weak so I asked Mrs. Jordan if she could come and visit during one of my classes. She was so helpful, suggesting several new materials to try and some different questioning techniques from a recent journal article. This made it easier for me to see how these comprehension strategies would work each day in class. In addition, I borrowed several papers on comprehension she had picked up at a recent national reading meeting. I think Mrs. Jordan has started me answering some of my questions. She is willing to share her ideas she's probably someone you need to get to know better."
>
> Miss Jones: "I should I think I'll ask her about . . ."
>
> (Fade out.)

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