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Research Perspectives: Secondary Schools and Functional Literacy

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Embedded at the very core of American education is the belief that schools should help all citizens achieve literacy; that all should be able to read and write. As society has become more complex, the goals of education have broadened and expanded but the strong expectation has persisted that schools should produce graduates who are literate or, in modern terminology, "functionally literate."

What is Functional Literacy?

There are many definitions of functional literacy and, at first glance, each seems to be quite different from the next. For instance, Powell (18) defines it in terms of levels, the U.S. State Department (17) defines it as a list of competencies, the Office of Education (13) uses a grade equivalent and other agencies (23) define it in terms of the ability to read and write simple statements.

Closer examination, however, reveals some commonality, especially in recent times. For instance, most studies focus on reading ability (3), several sources (12, 13, 16, 26) say that literacy is dependent upon one's culture and environment, others (18, 26) point out that functional literacy is tied to career need and many (13, 18) identify grade equivalents for functional literacy which all hover between 4.0 and 7.5. Consequently, a commonly accepted definition of functional literacy might be stated like this:

Functional literacy is that level of reading and writing ability (between 4.0 and 7.5) which is consistent with the community standards and which provides the foundation for successful accomplishment of careers typically associated with that community.

The school's task, then is to provide each child with the basic skills needed to achieve the literacy level necessary to function and work in his/her community environment.

Can All Children Achieve Functional Literacy?

While it is one thing to state that all children should achieve functional liter-

acy, it is entirely another to accomplish this task. Is it possible to have every child achieve literacy? An examination of reading achievement literature indicates that it is; much research is available indicating that all children CAN achieve functional literacy. For instance, Samuels (24) cites numerous studies supporting this conclusion as does Bloom (5), Reid (19), Graves (11), Sabitino (23), Wittrock (29) and Harman (13). The only limitations placed on this conclusion is that pupils must have minimum intelligence (23) and that some children must be provided with more time and instruction (6).

What is the Role of Secondary Schools?

It is the fact that some children must be provided with more time and instruction which is the key to the secondary school's role. Traditionally, reading instruction is terminated at the end of grade six. The assumption underlying this practice seems to be that children will automatically refine their reading skills once the basic skills have been developed in the elementary school. Research, however, contradicts this assumption. Several studies (9, 19) indicate that little growth in reading competency is realized in the secondary school years and that some pupils never effectively master some skills. In fact, the famous Gray and Rogers study (10) indicates that adults who complete high school are superior in reading only to a limited extent over those adults who terminate their education at the end of grade school. In other words, many adults are not now reading much better than they did at the end of elementary school and one can conclude that if a child is not functionally literate then, he/she probably will not be at the end of high school. Consequently, the research (14, 28) indicating that numbers of our graduates are not functionally literate is no surprise, nor is the growing trend toward secondary reading.

The idea of teaching reading in the secondary school is not a new one. Ever since the pioneering efforts of Buswell-

Judd and Terman-Lema in the early part of this century, reading has been viewed as a developmental process in which the acquisition of reading skills and the process of growth and development are interdependent (22, 25). This developmental view of reading led educational leaders as early as 1925 to conclude that reading maturity could not be achieved in the elementary grades alone, regardless of how effectively the children are taught and that, consequently, reading instruction must continue beyond the elementary school level (2, 21). Furthermore, research conducted in secondary schools having reading programs supports the view that reading competency improves if instruction is continued in the secondary school (4, 7, 8, 15, 27). Despite such evidence, however, most schools continue to terminate reading instruction at the end of grade six.

Implications

The facts indicate that some of our students fail to achieve functional literacy despite evidence that such a goal could be achieved for all. The implications of this fall into two categories.

First, all teachers must share in the responsibility for achieving universal literacy. Since some pupils will need more time and instruction than others, teachers should insure that the slower moving students receive more instructional time each year, should set the expectancy that each child can achieve literacy and should provide much teacher-guided assistance to insure achievement.

Second, since slow students seldom achieve functional literacy in the elementary school years, provisions should be made to continue intensive reading assistance into the secondary school years. Clearly, we cannot afford to neglect literacy skills. Since research indicates that reading maturity can be achieved when reading programs are provided throughout the high school years, we must abandon the traditional assumption that high schools have little or no responsibility for reading. As Artley (2) has said:

... we must make provision for reading growth that extends beyond the elementary level. A sound developmental reading program must give concern to the development of as high a

level of competence as the reader is capable of attaining.

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