April 1982

Making a Reading Lab Work

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Recent cutbacks in federal funds pose a potential threat to many local compensatory reading programs. Not only are federally-funded programs faced with reduced budgets, but locally-funded programs may find part of their monies being diverted to fill gaps in other programs left by the withdrawal of federal support. Compensatory reading programs at all levels — elementary, secondary, and community college — may be affected. It is imperative that these programs be able to show that they are essential, effective components of their schools' curricula and not just "frills." Fortunately, recent research and theory in the area of reading education and instruction do offer some valuable guidelines for the development of effective compensatory programs.

In this paper the content and form of one kind of compensatory reading program are examined. Inappropriate practices are discussed and several alternate practices are suggested.

SOME EXISTING PRACTICES

For some elementary and many secondary and community college compensatory reading programs the following description may be valid: students primarily work independently on completing exercises in commercially-developed kits or dittoed worksheets. Some work with various machines such as controlled readers, but in the past few years use of machines has been gradually replaced in many instances by utilization of kits. Students gather the needed materials, sit down at their desks, and complete the assigned work. Sometimes the completed work is checked by the students through reference to an answer key; in many instances, however, the teachers check the work themselves. Students who are having trouble completing an assignment are expected to ask for help. When students have completed an assignment successfully, they usually move on to the next assignment in

the kit in which they were just working or in another kit. In post-elementary labs, grades are frequently assigned and are often based in large part on effort.

Teacher roles in the kind of reading lab just described often appear to be primarily those of facilitator and checker. The teacher usually circulates about the room as the students work, stopping to answer questions, peer over shoulders, and suggest alternate strategies. The teacher is responsible for organizing and maintaining the program materials and for suggesting which assignments each student should complete next.

CRITICISM OF THESE PRACTICES

The instructional setting just described does have its attractions. Students are working and everything seems to be flowing smoothly along. Unfortunately, the successful performance of smoothly-functioning routines can camouflage the fact that many ineffective practices are being employed.

First of all, in a lab such as the one described, there is little or no actual instruction. Durkin's (1) examination of comprehension instruction in third through sixth grade classrooms produced the discouraging conclusion that even when teachers did interact with children, little actual instruction occurred. In the description given earlier, little planned interaction took place. And if teachers don't really teach when they do plan to teach, it seems highly unlikely that they can teach well when they don't even plan for it.

The interactions that go on in this kind of reading lab can often be characterized as based on the Smokey-the-Bear strategy: teachers circulate around the room, stamping out brush fires as they flare up. As a result of such reactive tactics, planned instruction is rarely delivered. Therefore, what on-the-spot instruction that does take place suffers from a lack of available examples to help the student under-

stand and from a lack of orderly attention to process. Furthermore, such stop-gap measures are rarely sustained. Teachers who must circulate around the room cannot spend the ten or fifteen minutes that may be the minimum time needed to develop understanding. Rather, the teachers have to resort to what Durkin calls "mentioning" (1, p. 505), whizzing through instruction in one or two minutes. Even worse, these interactions often take the form of "Try that again" or "Shouldn't the answer be thus and such?" Obviously, if the student tried to get the right answer the first time, such "instruction" is useless, for it gives no hints at all about how to get to the right answer.

A second and related problem with the scenario described earlier is that it seems to be based on the belief that remedial reading students can teach themselves to read better. Students who need remedial reading instruction do need additional practice in reading. However, self-directed practice is not sufficient. If these students could teach themselves, they wouldn't be in a reading lab. They need direct instruction. Furthermore, to expect poor readers to teach themselves through reading about how to use context clues or how to find a main idea, by employing through a medium that they can't use successfully, is indefensible.

A third problem with the practices described is that they are very product-oriented when they should be process-oriented. Stress should be placed on strategies, i.e., the processes of gathering, understanding, organizing, retaining, and producing information, rather than on the information itself or on the completion of an exercise. Product-oriented instruction which primarily rewards completion of assignments does not teach the student to value the learning of process. The product itself has no transfer value and students must not perceive the completion of assignments as their main goal. Without attention to process,

students will not attain the independence which a reading lab should develop.

An ancillary problem of product orientation that often results from using kits is that students get a great deal of practice in completing assignments of short to moderate length and in filling in missing blanks, matching definitions, and answering short questions. However, in order to develop independence in reading, students must work with a variety of kinds of materials so that they practice transferring the skills they are acquiring to varied contexts. They must do sustained reading rather than work with artifically shortened assignments. Furthermore, the connection between what they are doing in reading lab and what they are expected to do in their content area classes needs to be made explicit, especially for post-elementary students. This connection would be more easily made if students frequently used their content class assignments in reading lab as the products for applying processes practiced with kits and worksheets.

A fifth problem is centered around the policy of helping students mainly when they ask for help (that is, in a reactive manner) rather than helping students before they begin assignments. This policy has several negative aspects:

1. The policy assumes that the students can recognize when they need help. This is a faulty assumption, especially in a remedial class, and can result in students spending a great deal of time practicing incorrect processes.

2. This policy penalizes students who are shy, distrustful of teachers, or reluctant to ask for help for whatever reason. The policy assumes that a person who does not ask for help is simply unmotivated. Other more important reasons may prevent a student from seeking assistance.

3. It requires independence but does not develop it. In other words, for the student who is already an independent worker or who can readily learn independence, this policy

may cause no harm. However, for the student who needs direction and teaching to develop independence, this policy guarantees that the student will not receive aid unless the teacher happens to notice that the student is having trouble.

4. This policy sets up a "fail-rescue" pattern of interaction. The students interact with the teacher only when they publicly admit they have failed and then the teacher gets to rescue them. There is something psychologically unsavory about this interactive pattern.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Obviously the practices criticized above do not exist in every reading lab. But for many labs at least some of the descriptions will ring true. For those readers who do find some similiarities between the criticized practices and their own, some solutions are offered.

1. Each teacher in a compensatory reading program needs to develop his or her own conscious, consistent philosophy of reading education. Without the basis of such a philosophy, a reading lab program often falls prey to the practice of having the program be dictated by the materials available, rather than vice versa. When that happens, the only philosophy apparent is that practice teaches and remedial readers can teach themselves. Surely few teachers would actually agree with this as a philosophy.

2. Direct, sustained, planned, interactive teaching must make up the major portion of each class period. This instruction must be proactive rather than reactive. In other words, instruction should take place before students fail rather than after they have already failed. As part of proactive instruction, a policy of depending upon the students to initiate interaction must be abandoned. Instruction should be initiated by the teachers for those students they identify as needing instruction, before students are expected to work independently.

This instruction must be

presented in a carefully sequenced order with necessary examples at hand and with enough examples for sufficient repetition of the idea. Both negative and positive answers must be explored.

3. In the absence of a conscious philosophy of reading instruction many teachers are firmly product-oriented. In other words, the product orientation of the students and the activities in the lab is no accident. This product orientation must be replaced by process orientation. Students must be taught how to get to the right answer. What the right answer is in the long run is really of no importance whatsoever, insofar as reading instruction is concerned.

In addition, this instruction must develop processes that will transfer to reading and learning tasks outside of the reading lab. Such transfer must be explicitly planned for, through use of content area materials during instruction and practice. Students must be instructed in such a way that they perceive the parallels between what they are doing in reading lab and what they must do to complete other school assignments. This is especially important in post-elementary labs.

4. A variety of grouping patterns should be used to deliver instruction. Working primarily on a one-to-one basis is ineffective since many students have similar needs. Instruction on a one-to-one basis is also less effective than small group work because teachers do not have time to give each student adequate instruction on each skill or task (3). Grouping students on a temporary basis for specific instruction allows the teacher to deliver instruction in an interactive way to those students who need that instruction and to a much larger number of students. The problem of high teacher/pupil ratio is thus minimized. If students have similar process needs but are of varying ability levels, small group work on reading and thinking processes can be carried out at the listening level and at the reading level of the least able member of the group. Using the listening level removes the problem caused by variation in reading levels and yet develops the process skills needed. Individual independent follow-up work can then be assigned according to each student's reading level.

The Moore and Readence (2) model for parallel lessons can be particularly appropriate for instructing students of differing reading ability levels. In the model, the teacher begins instruction in a comprehension process, such as identifying a main idea, by using pictures. With pictures, the teacher moves as slowly as needed through three instructional steps: teacher modeling of the process, student recognition of the right answer when given choices, and student generation of the right answer without choices. Next, these same instructional steps are completed at the listening level. Work at this level is followed by activities using all three steps with students reading selections orally. Finally, the three steps are completed with students reading silently. The reader should note that until the silent reading step, variability of

reading levels within an instructional group should present no problem. At the picture level, no reading is necessary at all. At the next two levels, listening and oral reading, the students do not have to read anything beyond their reading levels. At the oral reading step, a student reads for the group something at his or her own reading level and the others listen.

SUMMARY

Effective compensatory reading programs can be developed. Such programs should be able to attract ever-dwindling funds if they are based on sound philosophies of reading education and provide planned, interactive instruction. They should emphasize process learning, not product learning, while utilizing a variety of grouping patterns and materials that facilitate transfer of processes learned to the

"real world" outside of the reading lab.

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