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Toward Excellence In Reading Instruction: A New (?) Michigan Model

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In the past few months I have noticed a shift of jargon in the politics of Michigan education. Perhaps you have noticed it too. I don't hear as much as I used to about *minimal* performance objectives; I am hearing a good deal more about criteria for *excellence*. Mind you, the intent and the direction hasn't changed, only the terminology. It seems that belt tightening for a backward look at the basics has been milked of its potential so it has been recycled into a more upbeat, optimistic set of lyrics: forward to excellence. Unfortunately, the message is the same as it has been for years, and reading instruction in Michigan classrooms continues toward more narrowly defined goals, behaviorally defined.

Let me examine one recently developed set of guidelines to illustrate my point, a model presented this spring by the Right to Read Program of the Middle Cities Project.¹ The report is in draft form so there is some hope that changes could be made, but I would be very surprised if anything more than cosmetic alterations will be made in the report. As it is, this model will influence the reading instruction of thousands of Michigan children through the large allocations of government funds available under the Right to Read Program. It is in the large, industrial Middle Cities of Michigan that so many children have little interest in reading - and little chance to benefit from narrowly defined perspectives on reading. The introduction to this document reads:

"This instrument has been devised as a check-list to facilitate the evaluation of the reading programs within your school district. This guide will assist in determining the degree to which your district supports the Criteria for Excellence developed by the Michigan Department of Education. In addition it will serve as a method to determine the needs that should be met in order to strengthen your present program.

A true assessment of the reading programs includes, by necessity:

1. An evaluation of all reading test data
2. The degree of organization, management and staffing of a total reading program.
3. The selection and appropriate utilization of materials and resources
4. The degree of emphasis in developing a positive learning environment within each school
5. The degree in which the community demonstrates a positive attitude toward reading
6. The degree of personal commitment of the school district to fulfill its obligation to provide each child with those reading skills necessary to pursue a chosen life role.

On the surface, we could accept some of these points quite readily, but on closer examination distressing factors appear: misplaced priorities, unrealistic expectations for teachers, important goals omitted.

Misplaced Priorities

The number one goal in Michigan education continues to be test scores so it should not be surprising that it is number one on this list. It is much more sensible for a program setting criteria for excellence to have as its first priority:

An evaluation of the percentage of children who *do* read a wide variety of print resources frequently and purposefully

The goal of every reading program should be to turn out readers. Record keeping on the number of children who are *able* to read has little value to anyone except demographers keeping statistics on the basic literacy rate. The only way any young reader will maintain and expand his skills, the only way his reading will really serve him, is through continued reading in and out of school.

1. Right to Read, Middle Cities Program, "Introduction to the Comprehensive Model for Reading that Supports the *Criteria for Excellence*," April 12, 1978 (Unpublished)

The challenge to achieve the number one priority I offer, helping children become readers, casts reading in a very different mold from a reading program designed to achieve test results. Instead of narrowing instruction to measurable objectives, examining test results and then zeroing in even more tightly, teachers who aim at the development of readers open children to their own thinking and the thinking of their peers, stimulate children with a wide range of print and non-print materials, encourage tentativeness, and questioning and challenging.

Tests have a place in the assessment of some aspects of learning and in the measure of some parts of programs on a local, state and national level. Putting tests as the number one priority in the evaluation of programs, however, warps the program and places unwarranted respectability on the test results that are reported.

The six priorities of the Middle Cities Right to Read Program place the assessment of the learning environment of the school and the attitudes of the community as numbers 4 and 5 on the list. Both school and community have major impacts on tests, and no interpretation of test results should be considered without them. Certainly, on any list of assessment priorities, the evaluation of the learning environment in the school should be given high priority and the attitudes of the school community about reading should follow soon after.

Goals That Are Omitted

Another statement, however, should have priority over any of those listed:

An evaluation of the oral language development program which provides the foundation upon which children add the reading of language.

Connie and Harold Rosen, in *The Language of Primary School Children*, say:

A child whose explorations with spoken language have been limited is going to have a much greater difficulty with reading than one who has been encouraged to use language fully and freely.²

Sara Lundsteen has said:

Show me a child in need of remedial reading and I will show you a child in need of remedial listening.³

The primacy of oral language and the inter-dependence of reading proficiencies and speech proficiencies have been noted for years. Few of our reading programs, and even fewer of the guidelines for the evaluation of programs, give any attention to the receptive (listening) and expressive (speaking) aspects of oral language development in children and young adults. I suggest that you examine the latest publication from NCTE on Walter Loban's 13 year longitudinal study; the report on the development of language power in the 211 students in his study clearly documents the inter-relationship of language skills.⁴

The lack of understanding of the importance of oral language is reflected in another omission in the assessment criteria of the Middle Cities Right to Read Program. It is not directly stated in the guiding statements on Page 1, but a further explanation of staffing requirements on later pages in the document turns up the problem. In surveying the competencies of the professional staff, certain areas of expertise are desired for Right to Read teachers:

learning theory

developmental reading (defined as decoding, comprehension and study skills)

evaluation (applied to student needs, materials, program effectiveness and professional staff competency)

Where is concern for knowledge of child language acquisition, and methodology for instruction in listening, speaking and writing as these relate to the teaching of reading?

Under the guidelines in this program, the reading specialist assigned to work with the teaching staff in each building is expected to have a Master's Degree in Education, including courses in six of the following nine areas: diagnostic and prescriptive techniques, learning theory, tests and measurements, developmental reading, curriculum development, supervision of instruction, clinical practices in remedial instruction, reading in the content

2. Connie and Harold Rosen, *The Language of Primary School Children*, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 165.

3. Sara Lundsteen, *Children Learn to Communicate*, Prentice Hall, 1976, p. 86.

4. Walter Loban, *Language Development: Kindergarten through Grade Twelve*, NCTE, 1976.

areas, problems of methods in teaching reading. Where in the training program of reading teachers is an understanding of language development stressed? At best, it may be a part of some of the other areas listed - at worst, there is a supposition that no relationship exists between a child's oral language and his or her efforts to achieve mastery of language in print.

Unrealistic Expectations for Teachers

I would like to turn your attention now to one last point raised by the assessment criteria presented in this Middle Cities document. Item No. 6 states:

The degree of personal commitment of the school district to fulfill its obligation to provide each child with those reading skills necessary to pursue a chosen life role.

There are two points presented here about which teachers should be very cautious. The first is the idea that we control what a child learns. It is very dangerous to indicate to parents, but more particularly to the student, that anyone but the student has control over what he or she learns. The principle of responsibility in learning should be learned at home and at school. A democratic society must expect its institutions to teach towards this concept if it is to people its society with responsible citizens. The school district does not "provide each child with reading skills;" it provides appropriate learning experiences so that children can learn to read if they choose to apply themselves. School districts and teachers cannot be held accountable for what children learn: the process is far more complex than opening

the student's head and sifting in a measure of learning. The student has a far greater responsibility for his own learning than the teacher or the school district. Teachers and school districts need to be accountable for "input," that is learning opportunities, not for "output," tests that purport to measure learning.

That same assessment criteria, No. 6, misleads us in another direction as well: "reading skills necessary to pursue a chosen life role." Obviously, this is a reference to a future career choice. The goals of elementary and secondary education should not be defined by future employment. All people will find themselves filling many roles in life: as a family member, as a citizen, as a consumer, as a person using leisure time, and as a person employed for wages or for volunteer work. If we design the education in our schools directly toward the skills necessary for types of employment as we now know them, probably we will be miseducating students for the jobs they will be hired to do in the future, but, even worse, we will be educating them for only one part of existence, the paid job.

I chose to examine for you one set of guidelines that will cross the desks of teachers, administrators and school board members in the state of Michigan. I think it is representative of many such documents that school faculties are expected to implement; if these directives are ignored, schools will find that the funding wells are very dry indeed. We must challenge those who write directives to give leadership and encouragement that will truly aim us toward qualities of excellence in instruction.



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INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION
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Topics for this year's convention will include elementary education, secondary education, adult literacy, college reading, basic skills, content area reading, research techniques and strategies, measurement and assessment, and children's literature. A special series of meetings has also been designed with the administrator in mind.

Social events include the annual banquet, book and author luncheon, and the annual reception. The more than 450 exhibits planned are also one of the convention's highlights.

Teachers, reading specialists, clinicians, administrators, college educators, students, and librarians will all find the IRA convention of value.

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Brochures will be sent to members in early 1979. Nonmembers may obtain information by writing International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, Delaware 19711, U.S.A.