Implications for Educators

The Reading Problem in the Secondary School

Terry C. Ley

Secondary schools must provide for the furtherance of student reading skill development, and the principal must provide the well-informed leadership for such programs. Some key concepts about reading instruction are outlined here, and an extensive resource list is provided.

TAXPAYERS AND THE MEDIA are deeply concerned these days by what they perceive as serious limitations in young people's abilities to read, use standard English, and compute. Those "basic skills," variously defined, are the topic of discussion and argument wherever people interested in education gather.

Volleys are fired at PTA meetings and bridge clubs and on the pages of learned journals and popular weeklies. Moved to action, some interested parties have taken their concern to state capitals, where they have sought and, in some states, achieved legislation they hope will ensure accountability in education and competence in young people.

Those responsible for the education of students in middle, junior high, and senior high schools often become perplexed, frustrated, and angry when they discover that they are to be held accountable for their students' mastery of certain reading, writing, and arithmetic skills. It has not been easy for these teachers and administrators to abandon a well-worn but now clearly outdated theory that teaching such skills is solely the responsibility of the elementary school.

Terry C. Ley is assistant professor, Department of Secondary Education, Auburn University, Auburn, Ala.

Regardless of technological changes that have had various effects on schools in recent decades, students must still read a great deal—and read well—in order to succeed in most schools. There is actually some evidence that today's adolescents read better, on the average, than previous generations of adolescents did, primarily because larger portions of the school-aged population remain in school longer. However, other evidence clearly shows that a sizeable portion of our school population cannot read easily or well.

Large numbers of otherwise marginal students who remain in school now find the reading they must do in biology or history classes, for instance, to be at best challenging and at worst discouraging. Such students inhibit their teachers' sense of professional success, too, because they do not learn the concepts and skills the teachers expect the textbooks to communicate. The resulting frustration can be channeled to positive action if teachers and administrators are willing to see reading not as a separate discipline taught only by specialists, but as a series of related skills developed throughout a lifetime.

A Secondary School Obligation

Every secondary school has the obligation to continue the development of reading skills initiated in elementary schools. Current attempts to legislate accountability for instruction in certain basic skills, including reading, have implications for many sectors of our society. The implications for secondary school educators—and for those who prepare them for their jobs—are especially notable because these teachers traditionally have not been prepared to cope with their students' reading problems. In several states recent changes in certification and recertification standards, usually requiring some preparation in reading for all secondary school teachers, reflect growing awareness that accountability for reading instruction begins in teacher preparation programs and requires continual support through productive inservice efforts by local school districts.

In seeking to fulfill their obligation to prepare mature readers, secondary school educators should be aware of at least 10 concepts about reading and reading instruction, and should strive to reflect that awareness in their behavior as they build curricula and teach young people. While there is much more to be said about reading instruction, these key concepts summarize recent textbooks in the field—particularly those which deal with reading in the content areas—and serve as focal points for recent research in reading.

Space limits the development of each concept here, but anyone wanting to explore a concept further can find help by consulting the list of resources which follows this article.

1. *Reading requires a set of competencies that develop at varying rates in individuals.* Those competencies undergo change as long as people continue to read. Among the elements of reading which require continuous development are: readiness for the reading tasks at hand; word study skills; vocabulary development; comprehension skills; critical reading skills; study skills; reading rate; ability to adapt rate and technique to purpose; and reading interests.
2. *Students in any class represent a wide range of reading abilities, and the higher the grade, the greater the range.* Before meeting a heterogeneous eighth-grade class, a teacher can reliably estimate that the range between the best and the poorest readers in the class will be eight reading grade levels. The poorest reader may read at the fourth-grade level; the best, at the twelfth-grade level. About a third of the class will score near grade level (8.0) on standardized reading tests; about a third will score a year or more above grade level; and about a third will score a year or more below grade level.

   Depending upon the school's dropout rate, by tenth grade the range will be 10 years; by twelfth grade, 12 years. The rule of thumb: in order to estimate the range of reading ability in a heterogeneous class at a given grade level, find two-thirds of the typical age of students in that grade. (Tenth grade: 2/3 x 15 = 10-year range.) The accuracy of this estimate may or may not be confirmed by achievement test scores for students in the class, but it should signal the many problems ahead for the teacher who plans to rely heavily on the reading of one textbook throughout a course. While grouping students by achievement will narrow the range somewhat, it does not permit teachers to assume that members of so-called homogeneous groups have the same reading strengths and weaknesses.
3. *Readers are disabled for a variety of personal and school-related reasons, some of which educators can control.* These factors, summarized from Forgan and Mangrum (1976), influence reading achievement:
   - *physical*—problems with vision, hearing, or general health;
   - *language development*—meager vocabularies, substandard language models;
   - *environment*—few positive experiences with reading outside of school;
   - *aptitude for reading*—poorly developed visual and auditory memories, inability to classify or make judgments, limited pool of experiences;

- *social-emotional*—unhappy relationships with peers and family and poor concept of one's abilities and worth; and
- *educational*—poor teaching, inappropriate materials, perhaps no opportunity for any instruction in reading beyond the fourth to sixth grade.

4. *Intelligence apparently influences the potential that students have for becoming skillful readers.* Reading requires visual and auditory discrimination abilities and other cognitive powers often explored by mental aptitude tests. Such mental abilities affect how rapidly people can learn to read. When given a reading achievement test, a hard-working, highly motivated student with limited intelligence may show only five months' growth after nine months of excellent instruction. That rate of growth may represent outstanding performance for that student. Given the same test, a gifted classmate may show evidence of 12 months' growth after nine months of instruction. As the years pass, the cumulative difference in the growth rates of the two students becomes increasingly evident until, in the tenth grade, those two students may represent the bottom and the top of the 10-year achievement range mentioned earlier. While intelligence factors appear to affect reading maturity significantly, it is important to remember that the other factors referred to in concept number three may influence readers to fall short of or exceed expectations that are based upon mental aptitude test scores alone.
5. *Too many of the students in our secondary schools are expected to be able to read materials that are too difficult for them.* Readability formulae are commonly used to describe the relative challenge of textbooks. Most formulae are based on the premise that the challenge of a piece of reading is related to the lengths of its sentences and the length of its words. Normally, a readability of 8.0, or eighth-grade level means that even a reader on an eighth-grade reading achievement level *must have some direction* in order to read the material with 80 percent comprehension. Therefore, even selected textbooks that are "on grade level" (8.0 for a class of eighth graders) will be constantly frustrating to the third of a typical heterogeneous eighth-grade class which is reading from one to four years below the eighth-grade reading level. An even larger portion of the class will have difficulty with a "grade level" textbook if their teacher expects them to read it independently, with little direction or assistance. Unfortunately, the readability of textbooks frequently exceeds the level of the grade for which they are purchased, creating an even greater problem for readers and teachers.

6. *Text materials reflect the uniqueness of the content areas for which they are written.* Reading a science text presents challenges not present in a mathematics text; both of them present challenges not present in narrative literature that one expects to find in an English class. In a sense, textbooks in each content area speak a language all their own, differing from textbooks in other content areas in vocabulary, sentence structure, paragraph and chapter organization, and graphic aids. Typically, it is comprehension of a content area's language which stands between students and their success in that content area. Content area teachers, who are experts with the languages of their respective fields, are best suited for assisting that comprehension. The content area classroom is the best setting for learning those special languages, too, for it is there that utility guarantees the constant reinforcement necessary to vocabulary and concept development.
7. *Teacher-constructed informal reading inventories allow teachers to assess how well students are able to read specific materials.* Such inventories require that students read selected passages from one or more textbooks which the teacher anticipates using with the class. After reading a passage, students answer a series of questions written by the teacher to probe their understanding of what they have read. Scores indicate the appropriateness of a textbook for individuals or classes. Informal analysis of responses yields diagnostic information which should suggest areas requiring instruction.
8. *By directing student reading activity teachers can facilitate student understanding of concepts crucial to the content areas and encourage development of reading skills at the same time.* Such direction begins as teachers consider diagnostic information they have gathered and anticipate the problems their students may have as they read a particular assignment. That anticipation results in prereading activity which prepares students for their reading; such activity motivates, builds concepts and vocabulary vital to comprehension, and encourages students to preview the selection and to establish specific purposes to guide their reading. Post-reading activity clarifies, reinforces, and extends the reading and provides for necessary skill development. Teachers unaware of the benefits of such directed activity are likely to continue to be gravely disappointed with the results of hastily given assignments which assume that all students in a class are capable of reading textbook material independently.
9. *When assistance from teachers is not enough—when reading skills*

are poorly developed and a single textbook inappropriate—teachers must seek alternatives to reading as the primary means of communicating concepts and skills important to their content areas. Some teachers use several textbooks written at a variety of readability levels and encourage students to share what they have read with mixed-ability groups. Others find that students who cannot read well can gain concepts and skills by watching a filmstrip or the teacher's demonstration, by hearing a recording or another student's report. A generous selection of print and nonprint resources is essential to any program that hopes to meet the diverse reading needs of the students it serves.

10. *A comprehensive secondary reading program should emphasize reading skills development in content area classrooms because that facet can have a great impact upon the entire student body. However, such a program must also offer developmental or remedial reading assistance to those who need or desire it, usually administered by a reading specialist or otherwise qualified teacher.* In such programs, reading teachers offer elective courses which appeal to secondary school students possessing a wide range of reading abilities; they set up and supervise reading laboratories; and they assist content area teachers who are determined to encourage reading growth in their classrooms.

Challenge for All Educators

No brief treatment of reading instruction can adequately define the challenge that confronts all educators. It can, however, confirm suspicions that, instead of a single reading problem, we have before us a complex system of problems that eventually is reflected in test scores by which the public judges the efforts of students and educators. And a complex system of problems requires an equally complex system of responses.

Effective responses to the reading problem require the leadership of well-informed administrators. Piecemeal efforts by a few individual teachers, though admirable, are insufficient. Administrators initiate their schools' responses when they attempt to learn as much as they can about reading skills, and communicate their concern to their faculties. Such leaders involve knowledgeable and interested faculty members in school reading committees responsible for planning and implementing long-range inservice programs for all certificated staff. These administrators seek to hire teachers with preparation or experience in reading. They encourage and support experiments by teachers who wish to break comfortable but unproductive patterns. And they insist that

the standardized reading achievement test be only one of many measures used for evaluating growth in reading.

Secondary school administrators cannot afford to relinquish their leadership responsibilities where reading instruction is concerned. They can seek the advice of specialists and enlist the aid of deputies to carry out portions of their school's response, but they must play a large role in the development of that response, for ultimately they must bear much of the responsibility for its success or failure. Most administrators need to know more about reading before they can begin to develop their school's response. The list of resources which follows should be helpful to those administrators—and to those teachers whose administrators ensure that their schools' professional collections contain as many of them as possible.

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*These books contain chapters or sections devoted to each of several secondary content areas.