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ABSTRACT

Research trends in secondary reading led the authors to investigate the process of dissemination of reading research to secondary school teachers and administrators. In considering ways of disseminating research, the concept of a continuum is introduced. At one extreme are the schools that take the responsibility for conducting their own research. In the middle are schools whose supervisory staff share research findings which have been published. Toward the end are the schools that bring in experts to talk to the teachers and administrators. At any point along this continuum, a breakdown can occur which interferes with the dissemination process. The person directing the research may leave the school, the manner and form in which research is shared may not be conducive to implementation, or an administrator may invite an expert who does not do a good job of bridging the gap between research and practice. The authors suggest alternative approaches to enhance the process of disseminating reading research throughout secondary schools in the United States. (Author)

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Dissemination of Reading Research
to Secondary School Teachers and Administrators

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A Paper Presented at the 26th Annual Meeting
of the National Reading Conference, Atlanta
December 4, 1976

One of the murkiest areas that we have come across in reading education is the area relating to the dissemination of reading research for secondary school teachers and administrators. It seems that while there are many ways to disseminate findings of research, there are many points at which there may be breakdowns in the process of dissemination. In the final analysis it seems clear that the human factor is of paramount importance in whether or not research findings are made use of in secondary schools. For reader ease we have organized our thoughts into research trends in secondary reading, ways in which research is disseminated in schools, alternative approaches, and conclusions.

Appreciation is extended to Margaret Early, Harold Herber, Stephen Koziol, Delores Mino, Joan Nelson, Anthony Petrosky, Harry Sartain, and Jerry Weiss for informal conversations on this topic.

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Research Trends in Secondary Reading

The past quarter of a century has seen an increased concern for reading in the secondary schools. One of the earliest textbooks on the topic was by Guy and Eva Bond (1941). Later in that decade the National Society for the Study of Education published a volume entitled Reading in the High School and College (Henry, 1948) containing articles by Gray, Strang, Witty, and many others. Arthur Gates (1952) presented a paper on "Reading Abilities Involved in the Content Fields" at the annual meeting of the New England Reading Association. Ted Harris (1956) wrote an article, "Implications for the Teacher of Recent Research in High School Reading" for The High School Journal.

The 1960's saw an emergence of more intense interest in blending the reading process into the content areas, notably English. This interest in content area reading is reflected in a section in the collection of readings by Jerry Weiss' Reading in the Secondary School (1961), Fusing Reading Skills and Content (Robinson and Thomas, 1969), and the National Conference on Research in English publication titled What We Know about High School Reading (1969).

Toward the end of the decade and into the 1970's there appeared research documents by Hal Herber and Peter Sanders (1969), Hal Herber and Richard Barron (1973) and textbooks for reading and content teachers in the secondary schools.

While these publications were being written by educators living in the East and Midwest, teacher education reports were coming from the West Coast. In Supervision of Reading Instruction in Junior High

School, Bob McCracken (1968) reports on the effectiveness of a National Defense Education Act Institute at Bellingham, Washington, and, in Preparation of Reading Content Specialists for the Junior High School, Harry Singer (1973) reports on a Riverside, California program funded by the U. S. Office of Education. One of Singer's writings is a lengthy paper appearing in the most recent yearbook of the National Reading Conference. (Singer and Rhodes, 1976).

As these various papers and volumes were making their appearance, Ed Summers was putting them into annotated bibliographies (1963, 1967). The annotated bibliographies--Reading Programs in Secondary Schools (Hill and Bartin, 1971) and Reading in the Content Fields (Fay and Jared, 1975)--became part of the series published by the International Reading Association, which joined with ERIC to publish Jim Laffey's monograph, Reading in the Content Areas (1972).

Ways in Which Research is Disseminated in Schools*

In considering the dissemination of reading research for secondary school teachers and administrators, it is helpful to have in mind the concept of a continuum. At one extreme are schools that take responsibility for conducting research. In the middle are schools that share research findings which have been published. Toward the end are schools that bring in experts to talk to teachers and administrators.

*Additional information on this aspect will be available upon completion of the examination of data obtained from questionnaires mailed by the authors to 1,000 school superintendents throughout the United States.

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The expression of Ralph Waldo Emerson, that an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man, is an apt one for schools conducting their own research. For often it is through the efforts of such a person, man or woman, on the administrative or supervisory staff, that research is initiated. The obvious danger, of course, is that when such a person leaves, the school may choose to no longer conduct research.

Through sharing, research findings make their way into many schools. How--and in what form--the research is shared is of prime consideration. Much research is written poorly; and even the better-written research tacks on, almost as an afterthought, educational implications. Often the research is not shared in a manner conducive to implementation.

Bringing in experts involves a cycle which usually begins with a teacher or supervisor who has been impressed by a writer or speaker. At any point the cycle can break down. The administrator, who is approached for money, can say no. So can the expert. Or the expert may come and not do a good job in bridging the gap between research and practice.

In brief, while there are many ways to share research, there are many ways in which this sharing may break down.

Alternative Approaches

In schools that take it upon themselves to conduct research, one person must assume the responsibility for coordinating the efforts of the rest of the faculty. In order for such research efforts to be

ongoing, however, the research leader must set up appropriate mechanisms. That is, everything must not hinge on only one person; the structure must be such that others can and will conduct research. While this is easy to say, it evidently is not easy to do, for rare is the leader who develops this kind of mechanism--that, upon departure, goes into motion.

One of the authors gave attention to sharing research findings in a talk given at the Sixth World Congress on Reading, and noted that, while some researchers write clearly, much research writing is among the worst writing in the world. Here is the final paragraph of a report that came to our attention recently. The report is entitled Decoding, Semantic Processing, and Reading Comprehension Skills:

In conclusion, our results suggest that decoding and semantic processing are separable processes, and that although less skilled comprehenders have difficulty decoding, this does not result in difficulties in accessing meaning. This finding may have important ramifications for the study of the reading process for it suggests that less skilled comprehenders can automatically pick up the meaning of printed words. The source of difficulty, then, may not be located in single word semantic processing, but in some other component of the reading process.

-- Golinkoff and Rosinski, 1975, p. 16.

It is no wonder that teachers or administrators do not pick up things like that to read: it is close to gibberish or what is more politely referred to as English.

It is hard to understand why students of reading research all over the continent have the impression that they must write up (or down) their research reports in the third person for the sake of objectivity.

(Subjectivity, which has so many charms, must wonder why so many researchers--except Piaget and a few other giants--adore Objectivity.)

We have never heard a satisfactory explanation of how phrases like "It was found that" and "The investigator administered the tests" instead of "I found" and "I tested" make for greater objectivity--even though it is easy to see how such phrases give the impression of greater objectivity.

Giants like Sir Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein described their experiments and observations in simple, uplifting language.

From Newton:

I made a little hole in the midst of the Paper for that Light to pass through and fall on a black Cloth behind it; and then I saw the two streams plainly.

- (from the Third Book of Opticks, p. 326.)

I took a black oblong stiff Paper terminated by Parallel Sides, and with a Perpendicular right Line drawn cross from one Side to the other, distinguished it into two equal Parts. One of these parts I painted with a red colour and the other with a blue. The Paper was very black...

- (from the Second Book of Opticks, p. 202.)

I measured....

- (from the Second Book of Opticks, p. 301.)

From Einstein:

Let us suppose our old friend the railway carriage to be traveling along the rails with a constant velocity...

- (from Relativity: The Special and General Theory, p. 19.)

I am standing in front of a gas range. Standing alongside of each other on the range are two pans so much alike that one may

be mistaken for the other. Both are half full of water. I notice that steam is being emitted continuously from the one pan, but not from the other. I am surprised at this, even if I have never seen either a gas range or a pan before. But if I now notice a luminous something of bluish colour under the first pan but not under the other, I cease to be astonished, even if I have never before seen a gas flame. For I can only say that this bluish something will cause the emission of the steam, or at least possibly it may do so. If, however, I notice the bluish something in neither case, and if I observe that the one continuously emits steam whilst the other does not, then I shall remain astonished and dissatisfied until I have discovered some circumstance to which I can attribute the different behaviour of the two pans.

Analogously, I seek in vain for a real something in classical mechanics (or in the special theory of relativity) to which I can attribute the different behaviour of bodies considered with respect to the reference-systems K and K' . Newton saw this objection and attempted to invalidate it...

- (from Relativity: The Special and General Theory, pp. 85-86.)

If Einstein and Newton wrote in straight-forward language one wonders why so many investigators of reading behavior now feel that they must combine the third person with the passive voice to come up with prose that is convoluted. It strikes us as very unlikely that Newton would describe his experience by saying, "The investigator was sitting under an apple tree when it appeared that an object that looked like an apple either fell or was dropped upon the investigator's head."

The medium is an important part of the message, and some teachers and administrators may not read research because of the appearance of the publication. One form, though, that seems to be popular is the newsletter. One of the authors was involved in setting up a six-page monthly educational newsletter while at the University of Alberta.

Authors' Note: The paragraphs about Einstein and Newton appeared in a similar form as a guest editorial by the senior author in the July 1974 issue of the Journal of Reading Behavior.

Called Elements, each issue focuses on translating research-into-practice of a specific area such as art, or language, or reading, or mathematics. The periodical is now in its eighth year, with subscribers in about fifteen countries.

Another educational newsletter, called Outcomes, made its debut last month at the University of Pittsburgh. It is jointly sponsored by the university's Reading/Communication Resource Center and the Gerald A. Yoakam Council of the International Reading Association. The first issue shared results of recently-completed doctoral dissertations and highlights of talks by Walter Loban, Dorothy Strickland, Alan Purves, Delores Minor and Charles Cooper at a Language Communications Conference earlier this year in Pittsburgh.

The Bible says no man is a prophet in his own land, and some years later Somerset Maugham noted that no man is a hero to his valet. Perhaps both of these expressions in part explains why flying in experts from some distance is a popular way of sharing research with teachers and administrators.

But this form of dissemination must be thought out most carefully. On what basis was the expert chosen? Surely not because he or she comes from a distance. Has the visitor been given a clear understanding of the needs and interests of the teacher and administrators?

What are the expert's views pedagogically? Does he believe in a skill-based reading program? Does she give consideration to the complex nature of youngsters?

What school of psychology is reflected: Behavioral psychology? Cognitive psychology? Developmental psychology? How familiar is the

expert with some of the findings of research now being conducted by Pearson at Minnesota? Herber at Syracuse?, Singer at Riverside?

How aware is he of the limitations of concept of readability formulas? Of cloze? Of transfer?

How much does she know about the concept of synectics? Of having the youngster move from the known to the unknown and back to the known again?

It may be helpful for teachers and administrators to remember that an expert is one who knows more and more about less and less, and while there are many reading specialists, there are few reading generalists.

Of importance to teachers and administrators is an understanding of where the expert is coming from philosophically.

One way to enhance this form of dissemination is by involving the experts more fully. Instead of flying in, talking, and flying out, as often happens, it would be helpful if speakers before their addresses visited with teachers and administrators in the school system. It is encouraging to know that, before taking on a long-range assignment, some vital people in our field insist upon seeing the schools in action to be sure that their views and those of the students, teachers, and administrators are in accord pedagogically and philosophically.

Conclusion

In the field of real estate there is an adage which conveys the wisdom that the three most important things to consider in buying a piece of real estate are location, location and location. In the field of reading--especially that aspect that involves dissemination of research--it seems clear that the three most important things to consider are people, people, and people.

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