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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon those aspects of "Becoming a Nation of Readers" directly relevant to classroom teachers, this booklet suggests ideas for classroom practices, based on research, that will improve students' reading achievement. The booklet is organized around five instructional themes: defining reading, reading readiness, beginning reading, directed reading lessons, and reading and writing. It provides a brief overview of each theme, followed by a discussion and examples of suggested instructional strategies. Among the specific questions addressed in the booklet are the following: (1) How can reading readiness activities build on oral language? (2) How can phonics be taught in conjunction with meaning? (3) What background building activities are most effective in directed reading lessons? and (4) What kinds of writing activities reinforce the reading-writing relationship? (FL)

Becoming a Nation of Readers:

Implications for Teachers

OERI

Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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Programs for the Improvement of Practice

Becoming a Nation of Readers:

Implications for Teachers

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Introduction

In the last few years, reports such as *A Nation at Risk* have brought problems in the American educational system to our attention. While they have offered needed policy directions, their recommendations have not been geared to classroom implementation. *Becoming a Nation of Readers* is the first major report directly applicable to improving instruction.

The report underscores the importance of reading for academic success and success throughout life. It documents many of the problems with reading instruction as it is currently conducted, while providing guidelines and models of how these problems may be addressed.

This booklet is a companion to the report. It highlights those aspects of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* directly relevant to classroom teachers. It suggests ideas for classroom practices, based on research, that will improve student's reading achievement. These ideas are offered both to make the findings of the report clear and to use as general guidelines.

This booklet is organized around five instructional themes:

1. Defining Reading
2. Reading Readiness
3. Beginning Reading
4. Directed Reading Lessons
5. Reading and Writing

A brief overview of each theme is provided, followed by a discussion and examples of suggested instructional strategies.

1. Defining Reading

"Reading is the process of constructing meaning from written texts. It is a complex skill requiring the coordination of a number of interrelated sources of information."[1]

Traditionally, readers have been seen as starting at the bottom—identifying letters—and working up through words, sentences, and paragraphs until text is fully understood. In this view, instruction focuses only on decoding, and on the skills needed to turn printed words into their oral equivalent. However, this view of reading represents only part of the picture.

Recent research has shown reading to be a more complex task. Readers do make use of letter-sound correspondences to establish word meanings. However, skilled readers attack print not only from the "bottom up" but also from the "top down." In directing their efforts to construct meaning, readers use their background knowledge, their knowledge of texts, and their ability to monitor their own understanding.

Reading can be described in five ways:

- Skilled reading is a *constructive process*. "Reading is a process in which information from the text and the knowledge possessed by the reader act together to produce meaning. Good readers skillfully integrate information in the text with what they already know."[2]
- Skilled reading must be *fluent*. "Readers must be able to decode words quickly and accurately so that this process can coordinate fluidly with the process of constructing the meaning of the text."[3]
- Skilled reading must be *strategic*. "Skilled readers are flexible. How they read depends upon the complexity of the text, their familiarity with the topic, and their purpose for reading."[4]
- Skilled reading requires *motivation*. "As every teacher knows, motivation is one of the keys to learning to read."[5] This motivation develops from the recognition that reading can be interesting and informative.

- Skilled reading is *a lifelong pursuit*. "Reading, like playing a musical instrument, is not something that is mastered once and for all at a certain age. Rather, it is a skill that continues to improve through practice."[6]

What Impact Does This View of Reading Have on Teaching?

Because skilled readers actively combine what is on the printed page with their own knowledge, teachers must recognize and appreciate that their students' interpretations may differ. The amount of information students possess on any topic may vary widely. Some children do not readily draw on their previous experiences when reading in school settings. Therefore, teachers must explicitly assist children in relating their own background information to the upcoming reading selection. This view emphasizes instruction that makes explicit how good readers read.

Many of the instructional methods teachers have developed and used over time have been demonstrated to be right on target. As *Becoming a Nation of Readers* points out, "if the practices seen in the classrooms of the best teachers in the best schools could be introduced everywhere, improvements in reading would be dramatic."[7] The following sections explore ideas for classroom practices.

2. Reading Readiness

The nature of kindergarten instruction is rapidly changing. Many factors are involved. First, because more mothers are working, more children entering kindergarten have had greater preschool experience. Consequently, for many children, kindergarten no longer serves as a transition from home to school because these children have learned to work with unfamiliar adults and have adjusted to the routines of schools. Second, many children also arrive at kindergarten with a background more appropriate for learning to read. This may be due to their having had greater exposure to preschool and instructional television shows such as Sesame Street. Concurrently, parents appear to be more aware and actively involved in providing children with appropriate language learning and prereading experiences. Children often enter school already knowing the names and sounds of the letters. Some may already be reading. Third, research has altered our view of what children can do. Likewise, research has altered our views of what reading is about.

In the past, kindergartens have typically focused on activities such as cutting and pasting, and hopping and jumping, under the belief that these activities would develop readiness for reading. Although these activities may be worthwhile for 4- and 5-year-olds, researchers have demonstrated that early experience in talking and learning about the world and written language is more appropriate for developing reading skills. Consequently, activities that expand this knowledge should become the focus of kindergarten instruction.

How Can Reading-Readiness Activities Build on Oral Language?

> **"What the child who is least ready for systematic reading instruction needs most is ample experience with oral and printed language, and early opportunities to write."[8]**

A good reading-readiness program might include activities such as:

Daily Reading Aloud. Listening to a teacher read helps children develop important reading comprehension concepts such as how language is used and the structure of stories. These benefits are greatest when children are active participants who engage in discussions, learn to identify letters and words, and talk about the meaning of words, sentences, and stories. As they listen and discuss stories, children will learn to make inferences about plots and characters. This is an important aspect in the language development of children.

Class Collaborative Stories. As the teacher records stories dictated by the group on the blackboard, chart paper, or computer, children learn about the conventions of language: words are composed of letters; reading from left to right is important; and writing permits people to communicate over time and space. This activity effectively nurtures the oral and written language abilities of children as they discuss and record common experiences.

Daily Individual Writing Experiences. One of the most effective ways for children to learn about written language is for them to write themselves. In fact, 90 percent of children entering kindergarten come to school believing they can write, while only 15 percent believe they can read. The desire to communicate can provide an incentive for using written language. When children do not feel constrained by requirements for correct spelling and penmanship, writing activities provide a good way to apply and extend their knowledge of letter-sound relationships.

Immersion In Print. Immersion in print can be accomplished in many ways. For example, every object in the room can be labeled. This strengthens the association between objects and print. Also, a plentiful supply of good books should be available to the children. Not only should children have an opportunity to listen to stories and watch adults read to them, children should also have an opportunity to hold books and imitate adults reading. Although the children might just be making up the words, they will actively experience books as a vehicle for communicating.

Class Discussion of Events. Teachers can capitalize on every opportunity to engage children in thoughtful discussion. If children are given opportunities to exercise their memories, reflect on experiences, give complete descriptions, or tell complete stories, they extend their stock of concepts and associated vocabulary.

3. Beginning Reading

Phonics instruction is now recognized as an essential beginning reading instructional strategy. Phonics instruction should begin early and, for the most part, should finish by the end of second grade. Phonics should be taught systematically. This systematic pattern should also be reflected in the materials the students read. Although researchers are still debating the best methods for phonics instruction, the goal is clear.

> **"The goal of phonics is not that children be able to state the 'rules' governing letter-sound relationships . . . (but) to get across the alphabetic principle, the principle that there *are* systematic relationships between letters and sounds."[9]**

Therefore, phonics instruction should target and teach only the most important and regular letter-to-sound relationships. In this way, phonics can help beginning readers to produce approximate pronunciations of words which may be checked against their own oral dictionaries.

The two ways to provide phonics instruction are explicitly and implicitly. In the explicit approach, sounds associated with letters are identified in isolation and then blended to form words. Evidence suggests that "teachers who spend more than average amounts of time on blending find larger than average gains on first- and second-grade reading achievement tests."[10] In the implicit approach, the sound associated with a letter is never pronounced in isolation. Instead, the teacher will provide the students with a group of words that begins with the same letter and ask what is the same about the group. She will draw the children's attention to the fact that all the words begin with the same letter and start with the same sound. Children can generalize that sound to other words that begin with the same letter.

However, phonics instruction alone is not enough. Phonics instruction must be carried out in conjunction with meaning.

How Can Phonics Be Taught in Conjunction with Meaning?

> **"Each encounter with a reading selection should serve the dual goals of advancing children's skill at word identification and helping them to understand that reading is a process not simply of word recognition, but one of bringing ideas to mind."[11]**

Even beginning readers can read meaningful material using certain basic techniques:

Reading pattern books or predictable stories, which repeat words and ideas, make it possible for children to predict and recognize the recurring phrases. This use of pattern, which is often done through rhyming, gives children an opportunity to reenforce the letter-sound correspondences as word families are developed. In good examples of these stories, 'Pat sat on the mat' is replaced by imaginative narrative such as

> "What can you do with a shoe?
> You can fill it with pickles, or popcorn, or glue.
> An octopus could rest in it.
> A bird could build a nest in it.
> A turtle could be a guest in it.
> Or would a horse look best in it?"[12]

Not only do children enjoy reading this type of narrative, they can also explore alternatives. They can play with language and expand their imaginative horizons as they conjure up creative pictures of common objects.

Assisted reading is a more straightforward technique which helps build confidence through practice. First, the child is asked to repeat the word, phrase, or sentence the teacher has read. Then, the teacher and child read the word, phrase, or sentence simultaneously. Finally, the child reads the passage or sentence alone. If the materials closely reflect the phonetic skills being taught, the child will have had three positive

encounters with print, and the alphabetic principle will have been reenforced.

Writing with invented spellings motivates children to use the alphabetic principle to communicate. For example, when asked to write a story, one first-grader wrote:

"The Wrlds Gradts Dog
My dog Teena and my fends dog Roobe aer vary nis dogs
Oan 'ay a ltl gril fal in the wote
Rooby and Teena savt are "[13]

(The World's Greatest Dog
My dog Tina and my friend's dog Ruby are very nice dogs.
One day a little gi l fell in the water.
Ruby and Tina saved her.)

In conveying her ideas, the child focused first on beginning and ending consonants. But as parents and friends asked her, "what does this say," she eagerly worked at refining her spelling so that it could easily be decoded. Her knowledge of letter-sound relationships were acquired, not learned, because of need and the desire to communicate, instead of endless dull drill.

4. Directed Reading Lessons

The Directed Reading Lesson is the most commonly used lesson format. In general, this format has three stages:

- In the *Preparation* stage, vocabulary and background information related to the story are discussed by the teacher and students.
- In the *Reading* stage, students read the selection, which is sometimes divided into smaller segments, with each section preceded and succeeded by discussion, questions, or both.
- In the *Discussion* stage, students have an opportunity to respond to the entire story as the teacher asks questions which review the story and its implications.

Although the ***preparation stage*** of reading instruction is known to improve comprehension, classroom observation has shown that this part of the lesson is most often skipped. When teachers use instructional time to build essential background knowledge, students focus their attention on the important aspects of their reading. This has a dramatic effect on their comprehension.

What Background Building Activities Are Most Effective?

> **"Useful approaches to building background knowledge prior to a reading lesson focus on concepts that will be central to understanding the upcoming story, concepts that children either do not possess or may not think of without prompting."[14]**

The purpose of background activities should be to get students thinking about certain aspects of the upcoming story. Prereading activities should provide students with a framework for organizing events and concepts in the story so that many threads become interrelated and more memorable.

Assigning a perspective often helps children focus on particular elements of a story. For example, when two groups of college students were asked to read the same story, one from the perspective of a potential house-buyer, and the other from the perspective of a potential burglar, there were distinct differences in what each group recalled. The 'potential house-buyers' remembered such details as the condition of the roof and basement, while the 'potential burglars' remembered such details as unlocked doors and the location of valuable items. The predesignated perspective provided an organizational framework for the students. Similarly, when the assigned perspective relates to the desired learning outcome, it profoundly affects children's ability to understand and remember the materials being read.[15]

Questions that highlight a theme are another way of drawing the students attention to the important aspects of an upcoming story. For example, this direction-setting activity from one basal reading program is a good model. The story is about a girl who convinces a male companion that her job possibilities are not determined by her sex. The teacher is directed to say:

> " 'How many of you think that you know just what jobs you want to have someday? . . . Let's hear about some of these jobs. . . .' Following these responses, go around the group asking pupils the questions, 'How would you like to be a ____? Why or why not?' Ask the girls about occupations that have often been associated with boys—pilot, firefighter, engineer, dentist, etc. Ask the boys about occupations often associated with girls--nurse, kindergarten teacher, secretary, etc. Through questioning and discussion, guide them to arrive at the conclusion, or to begin thinking in the direction, that there are really no valid reasons why a boy can't be a nurse or a girl can't be a pilot, provided that each is trained or prepared or educated."[16]

Appropriate background-building and direction-setting activities help students to think clearly about the story.[17]

Within the ***reading stage,*** time for extended silent reading is essential. In fact, the Commission on Reading recommends that by the time children are in third or fourth grade, they should read independently a minimum of two hours per week. But this phase of the directed reading lesson should be more than just silent reading. It should also include oral reading. However, the proper roles of silent and oral reading are still being debated. Observations of American classrooms indicate that oral reading may not be optimally handled in the typical classroom.

How Should Oral Reading Activities Be Structured?

> **"Authorities recommend that children read a selection silently before they read it aloud. Research suggests that this practice improves oral reading fluency."[18]**

Oral reading in beginning reading instruction can tie the child's home experience of being read to with the new experience of reading in school. Reading aloud also allows teachers to observe the child's developing abilities. Additionally, oral reading provides children with a way to share their new skills with their parents or siblings. However, except for diagnostic purposes when the child may read aloud privately for the teacher, children need not read orally in front of other students without having first read and "practiced" the selection silently.

The way the teacher deals with mistakes helps determine the value of oral reading. If a child makes too many mistakes, it may be safe to conclude that the material is too difficult and the child should be given something easier. Otherwise, a sensible rule of thumb is to ignore most mistakes unless they disrupt the meaning. If the oral reading mistake changes the meaning of the text, it is best to *wait* to see if the child will correct the mistake. If not, the teacher should direct the child's attention to clues about the word's meaning or pronunciation, depending upon the nature of the error. After correctly identifying the word, the child should reread the sentence to recover its entire meaning.

A number of methods provide oral reading practice. Examples include:

A 'round-robin' format is the traditional form. The virtue of this method is the equal distribution of turns. Volunteer reading allows

assertive children to get more than their fair share of turns. Equalizing turns among children is necessary. Even in the best of circumstances, however, 'round-robin' reading is not ideal for developing fluency and comprehension. With poor readers especially, the problem is magnified by the quality of the practice.

Repeatedly reading the same selection until an acceptable level of fluency is attained is an alternative to 'round-robin' reading. This may be accomplished in a number of ways:

- small groups can read along with an adult or tape;
- children can practice silently and then read to the teacher;
- pairs of children could take turns reading aloud to one another.

Having poor readers repeatedly read the same selection has met with success. These students have shown a marked improvement in speed, accuracy, and expression during oral reading of new selections and also have improved their comprehension during silent reading.

Choral reading exercises, or story theater, are activities which also improve oral reading. In choral reading, children practice and read a selection aloud as a group. A single child or a small group of children may have 'solo' parts to enhance the dramatic quality. Story theatre, which can include acting out a favorite story using the story as narrative to go with mime, has been particularly successful when children act out stories classmates have written. These activities tie the intonation patterns of spoken language to the printed word and enhance comprehension.

Many exciting developments have taken place in the ***discussion stage*** of the directed reading lesson. Typically, this phase includes discussion of the whole story, some follow-up activity which uses the story for illustration, and the assignment of seatwork.

What Activities Are Most Effective During the Discussion Phase of a Directed Reading Lesson?

> **"Young readers, and poor readers of every age, do not consistently see relationships between what they are reading and what they already know."[18]**

Activities which draw students' attention to what they already know, be it content or "how to" information, are the most effective discussion phase activities. Teachers can ease children's understanding through activities such as:

Questioning strategies that lead children to integrate central points of a selection with information they already know will significantly improve comprehension. Asking well-crafted questions makes the difference. These questions are generally open-ended in that they have no single right answers, they require students to tie many pieces of information together, or they often require analogies for their solutions. Too often, however, the questions in teacher's manuals are poorly crafted because they tend to focus children's thinking on unimportant details instead of probing the major elements of the plot. When preparing lessons, teachers should evaluate the quality of the questions and, in particular, be sure they are not too detailed.

Direct instruction aimed at teaching children how to think critically as they read, how to self-monitor their understanding, and how to vary their reading according to the task should be an essential part of reading instruction. While good readers seem to use these strategies intuitively, beginning or poor readers do not use and seem oblivious to the need for using these skills. However, when they receive direct instruction in these skills, all readers make substantial improvement.

This instruction may take the form of teachers "modeling" how they go about understanding a passage. Not only do the teachers provide "how to" information, but they also include information on why and when to use the strategy. Examples of programs which encourage direct instruction in comprehension strategies include "reciprocal teaching" and "informed strategies for learning."

- In "reciprocal teaching," the teacher first teaches the students to monitor their understanding by devising questions about the passage, summarizing it, predicting what will follow, and resolving inconsistencies in it. Then, each student takes the role of teacher by asking other children questions about the text and identifying confusing aspects of the text which the group could clarify. In this way, students adopt the roles and cognitive activities of teachers as they monitor each others' and their own comprehension of text.[20]

- In "Informed Strategies for Learning," students are taught how to use strategies such as skimming, why the strategies are helpful, and when to use them. Teachers reinforce the importance of these strategies by using metaphors such as "Be a Reading Detective" and "Road Signs for Reading" to help students visualize the tasks. Students meet in groups so they can actively participate in dialogues and express their own views while listening to peers.[21]

In addition to the discussion phase, teachers often assign "seatwork" as follow-up activities to the directed reading lesson. In most classrooms, workbooks and skill sheets play a large part in reading instruction. In fact, students may spend up to 70 percent of the time allocated for reading instruction in "seatwork." However,

> **"Analyses of workbook activities reveal that many require only a perfunctory level of reading. Children rarely need to draw conclusions or reason on a high level. Almost none require any extended writing. . . . Many workbook exercises drill students on skills that have little value in learning to read. . . . Classroom research suggests that the amount of time devoted to worksheets is unrelated to year-to-year gains in reading proficiency."[22]**

Teachers have typically used workbooks and skill sheets as ways to manage their classroom reading instruction: as teachers worked with one group, the other children worked on workbook assignments. If, as recommended, teachers decrease their use of worksheet activities, they will need to look for alternative activities which meet three criteria:

1. Students should be able to engage in the activity either *independently* or with the help of another student.
2. The reading activities should use *meaningful units of text*. Reading stories, for example, is more meaningful than reading isolated sentences.
3. The writing activities should require children to *communicate a complete message*. Having children write letters which will actually be mailed, for example, is more useful than having them fill in blanks on worksheets.

These types of meaningful follow-up activities are often the stock and trade of a good teacher's repertoire. Sharing your "jewels" with fellow teachers may yield numerous alternative activities which would truly meet the three criteria.

5. Reading and Writing

Recent research has focused on the interrelatedness of reading and writing. Not all researchers agree on the nature of the relationship. Some see reading and writing as reciprocal acts, while others see them as distinctly different. Nevertheless, extended writing activities consistently have been shown to have a positive impact on students' comprehension abilities. This is particularly true when extended writing activities are contrasted with workbooks or fill-in-the-blank activities.

What Kinds of Writing Activities Reinforce the Reading-Writing Relationship?

> **"Research suggests that the finer points of writing, such as punctuation and subject-verb agreement, may be learned best while students are engaged in extended writing that has the purpose of communicating a message to an audience."[23]**

The following writing activities give students an opportunity to share and reflect in writing as they learn and grow.

Dialogue Journals are just what their name says—personal records of the dialogue between two people. When used in schools, dialogue journals allow student and teacher to communicate in a new meaningful way. The student writes about whatever he or she is interested in, and the teacher shares comments, reactions, questions, and thoughts while providing a writing model. The teacher can carefully avoid topics or issues parents might find sensitive and private.

The essential aspect of the dialogue journal is that the teacher responds to every written entry, and that the response contains no revision or evaluation of what the student has written. The teacher's responses motivate the child to communicate. When the teacher's comments reflect an idea contained in the student's message, the student moves beyond the superficial to expand and elaborate.

Learning Logs use the format of a dialogue journal to help students reflect on what they have learned. Students are asked to express in their own words what they have learned and how they learned it. The goal is not to repeat what the book or teacher said. Rather, the student is expected to connect new with previously learned material.

Teacher-assigned questions guide the students to focus on a specific instructional objective, or learning experience. As the students organize and focus on their response, they must actively reflect on the content of what is learned, the relationship of that content to other content already learned, and the language necessary to express these ideas.

Student Author programs which give students the opportunity to write stories for "publication" are one of the most exciting ways to get children to read and write. Through the publishing process, children have opportunities to express themselves and to see themselves as authors. Suggestions for enhancing this type of activity include:

- Forming a Drop-in Writing Center where parent volunteers, teacher aides, or both help students clarify ideas, revise content, work on mechanics and publish final copies of their work.
- Developing a Classroom Handbook made by the students to which they can refer to find "color" words, "size" words, and the like. Other class books might include a daily journal or scrapbook that enables children to record special happenings, birthdays, or classroom learning experiences.
- Convening a Young Author's Conference where students come together to share what they have written and to discuss the writing process author-to-author. Many times, real authors, song writers, or storytellers are invited to share their experiences as an author.

Conclusion

Becoming A Nation of Readers is just the beginning of the joint journey into making all children literate. The report helps parents, teachers, schools, and communities to organize effective ways to improve reading instruction in America. In charting the course from September to June, teachers may do well to remember the recommendations set out in the report:

- "Preschool and kindergarten reading readiness programs should focus on reading, writing, and oral language."
- "Teachers should maintain classrooms that are both stimulating and disciplined."
- "Teachers of beginning reading should present well-designed phonics instruction."
- "Reading primers should be interesting, comprehensible, and give children opportunities to apply phonics."
- "Teachers should devote more time to comprehension instruction."
- "Children should spend less time completing workbooks and skill sheets."
- "Children should spend more time in independent reading."
- "Children should spend more time writing."[24]

This booklet is intended to help teachers translate the recommendations of the report into practices which they can bring into their classrooms tomorrow. However, on its own, this pamphlet is insufficient. Teachers should have an opportunity to read the report in its entirety. Copies are available from the University of Illinois for $4.50. Send a check or money order payable to *The University of Illinois—BNR* to Becoming a Nation of Readers, P.O. Box 2774, Station A, Champaign, Illinois 61820-8774.

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