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ABSTRACT

A substantial body of reading research indicates that poor readers would become much more successful if teachers pretended that they were actually good readers. First, research suggests that teachers should provide poor readers with more silent and less oral reading time, thereby furnishing them with more reading experience that emphasizes meaning as opposed to word accuracy. Second, studies suggest that teachers should take steps to ensure proper reading placement so that students can attain success and fluency in reading. Third, research shows that approximately 85% of the questions teachers ask are literal and factual in nature and that teachers should provide adequate instruction in inferential and critical reading comprehension skills for reading to be a meaningful activity. Fourth, studies indicate that teachers allow poor readers substantially less time to react to questions than they allow good readers. Instead, teachers should support these students through adequate response time. Fifth, research suggests that students' attitudes toward reading are a direct result of reading experiences that teachers help to create in the classroom. Teachers should engage students in various enrichment activities to make their reading experiences fun. Finally, extensive research indicates that library reading is essential to a total reading program. Students learn to read by reading, and reading is motivated by the belief that reading is fun. (JD)

What would happen if you pretended in your classroom that the poor readers were actually good readers? We have enough research evidence to suggest that your expectation would be fulfilled—they would actually become much more successful. If you would like to make your poor readers better, let me present some of that evidence and the direction it indicates.

Understanding "reading"

First, any accomplished reader knows what "reading" is. It is the act of approximating and reacting to ideas represented in print; it is not that of processing words or making noises for letters. But do your poor readers know this? Research clearly says they do not.

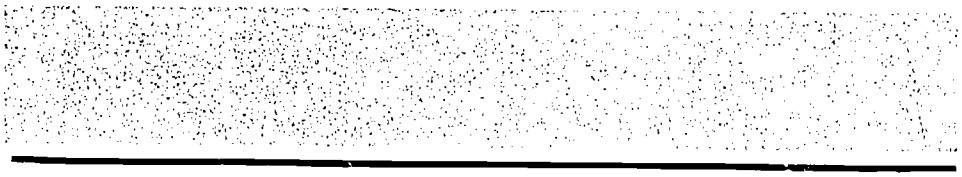
Garner and Kraus (1981-82) reported a study involving seventh graders who were asked about reading. From a group of forty, fifteen "good comprehenders" and fifteen "poor comprehenders" were selected. They were asked questions such as: "What things does a person have to do to be a good reader?" Good readers responded with comments such as: understand what you're reading, get the ideas. Poor readers said: pronounce the words right, know all of the words. When asked how they knew if they were reading well, good readers said: if I got the big ideas, if I understood. Poor readers replied: if I knew all the words, if I read fluently out loud.

LaFontaine (1984) replicated this study with fifth graders and received essentially the same responses to the questions. The good readers said they would have to understand the story, be interested in the story, and so on. Poor readers said they woud have to pronounce words, understand the words. When asked how they would know if they were reading well, the good readers indicated again "if I understood the story," "if it makes sense." Poor readers once more exhibited a fixation on words: "if I don't have any trouble pronouncing the words," "if I got all the words."

So, what is "reading"? To good readers it is essentially the same as for any accomplished adult reader: it has to do with getting at meaning. For poor readers, it is a matter of processing or saying words. Where have these two diametrically opposed notions come from when these good and poor readers have even been in the same classrooms with the same teachers?

Oral vs silent reading

Allington (1983) sheds some light on that question. He reported on the difference in the way teachers treat good and poor reading groups in a classroom. Good readers spend seventy-five percent of their time



in silent reading, while poor readers spend seventy-five percent in oral reading. What is reading? To good readers it must have something to do with getting at meaning because they are going to discuss the story after they are finished. To the poor reader, reading is a performing act, a matter of saying the words orally—and correctly.

Allington's further comments can be verified in almost any classroom. What do *you* do when a student miscalls a word? With the top reading groups, usually nothing, because you know that child knows better. It is as if I were reading something orally and inadvertently miscalled a word. You know I know better. But when the poor reader miscalls a word, what do you do? "Wait a minute, Freddy. Look at that word again. You know the sound that letter stands for," etc., etc. By the time most teachers are finished, the poor youngster has forgotten what the story was about.

What can be done on this point? Treat the poor readers more like the good readers. Let your less able readers find out that the purpose for reading is to get at ideas rather than to process words. Also let them realize, as Frank Smith (1982) has pointed out and as good readers know, the good reader is a risk-taker; no good reader strives for one-hundred percent word accuracy.

Hiebert (1983) also reported another practice that increases this fixation on words as opposed to meaning for the low reading group. They receive much more word-list drill than top reading groups. This is in contrast to the fact that knowledge of words alone is not sufficient to assure comprehension. As far as the reading process is concerned, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Jenkins (1978) found that instruction on vocabulary alone did not improve passage comprehension: students taught all word meanings still would not comprehend the passage meaning. Nevertheless, Hiebert reported another observable fact: it is the poor readers who get the drill on word lists and flash cards; they are the ones who receive the word list to take home and "study" for reading. Is it any wonder they think reading is a matter of knowing the words?

Placement

Of course the preceding statements, as well as those to come, are predicated on the idea that children will be placed in material they can read. Yet, it is here that the poor reader suffers most. In one school that had just adopted a modern basal series and carefully placed each student by placement test, I found twenty percent of children pushed beyond their reading level in less than eight months. Teachers in my classes who have engaged in research projects with

their own students to verify reading placement have found as many as fifty percent of their children misplaced in the basal. Why does this happen? There are many reasons: pressure from next year's teacher, the principal, or even from parents who think that the harder the book, the more a child will learn. Yet we all know that any child can learn whatever we want to teach from material that is easier than it needs to be; no child can learn from material he or she can't read.

This point can be carried even further. A number of researchers (for example, Fisher, et al, 1979; Hoffman, et al, 1984) have reported that the higher the success rate, the higher the achievement. Do we need research to point this out? Yet who has success in the classroom?

Comprehension practice

If reading is to be a meaning-getting activity, it must involve comprehension instruction. Traditionally, comprehension skills have been discussed in terms of three categories: literal, inferential, and critical reading. Literal refers to what the author said; inferential, to what the author meant; and critical reading, to the reader's evaluation of what the author said and meant.

Sometimes even these categories are misunderstood. I recently had an experienced teacher indicate pleasure at the existence of these three "levels," since she asked the low readers literal questions, the average, inferential, and so on. These are not levels of difficulty by any stretch of the imagination. One can ask simple inferential questions and very difficult literal ones. In fact, a number of studies have indicated that ability level is not a significant factor in determining who can learn and apply even critical reading skills (Taba, 1965; Lanseigne-Case, 1967).

However, if children at any level are going to comprehend, we must do a better job of teaching these skills. On this point, research suggests that few, if any, children—good or poor readers—get adequate instruction. Evidence is that we do a very poor job—in fact, practically no job at all. Durkin (1978-79) reported that less than one percent of time was devoted to comprehension instruction in classes she observed, with most time (17%) devoted to assessment. While we might agree that questioning is not "teaching," we could suggest that it is a little better than testing; questioning is more like practice. Yet we owe youngsters more than practice; we owe them instruction that can be provided through demonstration and explanation. After a question has been answered, follow with "How did you know?" or

"What made you think that?" Either have the re spo er children, or yourself point out clues that led to the answer.

Of course, it also becomes obvious from the research 1970; Guszak, 1967) that we are not doing well even with the eaders in terms of the practice we provide. Depending upon the stu exam-ined, seventy-five to ninety-five percent of the questions te chers ask are literal/factual questions. Inferential and critical reading skills are sadly neglected. In the 1980 National Assessment in Reading (Education Commission of the States, 1981), even seventeen-year-olds who could answer comprehension questions could not answer "why" they believed as they did. Youngsters find out too early that teachers don't care "why" and that they only ask questions to which they know the answer and they want to find out if pupils do. We have to let children know that "why" is much more important than whatever answer they give.

Why do we spend so much time on the literal when research (Hillocks and Ludlow, 1984), as well as common sense, indicates that inferential and critical reading presume literal understanding? Anyone who can answer an inferential or critical reading question about a selection has already understood the literal. On the other hand, one might be able to answer a literal question and not be able to answer questions in either of the other two categories.

Not only is practice beyond the literal important in order to develop more sophisticated thinking skills, it also leads to more sophisticated language used in responses (Smith, 1978), a finding supported by common sense. If a literal question is asked, what do we get in response? Usually one word—the "answer." If an inferential question is asked, the reply will most likely begin with "Well, because . . ." Who needs that practice in language most. We don't need Hiebert's findings (1983) to tell us who gets the most practice in responding to higher level questions!

Wait time

Practice through questioning is also poor from another viewpoint: the time students are allowed in which to respond to questions. Lucking (1975) reported that the average adult takes about fifteen seconds before responding to a question, while teachers allowed their pupils as little as five seconds. Worse, Gambrell (1983) reported that third graders were given less than one second to respond. Of course, who is allowed the most time to answer? Naturally, the good reader. One study reported that teachers waited three times as long for the good student to respond as they did for the slow student!

Use a tape recorder in your classroom to check for this kind of negative self-fulfilling prophecy. How much "wait-time" do you allow? There is something about silence that invites a response. Furthermore, Hassler (1979) found that increased wait-time resulted in higher level questions and more sophisticated thinking.

Good and Brophy (1969) reported this same reverse system—the one helping the poor reader get worse—from another aspect. When a bright child failed to respond to a question, the teacher most often rephrased that question or otherwise provided support for the student. When a poor student failed to respond, the teacher usually asked someone else. Yet, who needs the support most? But, of course, from whom do we *expect* an answer?

Enjoyment of Reading

Is reading an enjoyable activity? Ask your students if you need to, but you already know the answers: good readers know it is; poor readers think it is not. This difference in attitude is more than a result of the amount of difficulty they have with reading. It is a direct result of other experiences that we, as teachers, set up for them. For example, questioning and discussion are not the only techniques for increasing comprehension. Role playing and story dramatizations have been found by some researchers to be even better for increasing story comprehension by young children (Miller and Mason, 1983; Pellegrini and Galda, 1982). But who gets to have the fun and experience of doing these kinds of "enrichment" activities? We all know who!

Finally, we seem to have learned at last that, while we certainly can teach some basic skills that will contribute to achievement in reading, children also learn to read by reading. In fact, Yap (1977) found a higher relationship between amount of reading and reading achievement than he found between IQ and reading achievement. Yet, who gets the experience in reading? Consider Allington's findings again about the relative amount of time spent in the reading groups on silent or oral reading. In silent reading, how many members of the group are reading? All of them! During oral reading, how many members of the group are reading? One at a time! Add to this the fact that oral reading is much slower than silent reading, and you might determine who is doing most of the reading—those who need the practice least.

And practice is not all that is required in order to increase reading achievement. Again, we are back to the matter of finding out that reading can be fun. Interest—the desire to read—is essential. We spend so much time *teaching to read* that many children—especially the less able readers—don't have time *to read*. We all know what hap-

pens in most classrooms: "All right, boys and girls, when you finish those three workbook pages you may read your library books." Who gets to read the library books? Yet, this kind of reading is not a frill—it is not a reward for finishing work. The library reading program is an essential part of the total program and should represent fifty percent—literally *half*—of the time called "reading" in the classroom.

This statement is supported by research too voluminous to mention. Evidence from Individualized Reading in the 1960's is clear: even schools that threw out the basal reading series entirely—and in some cases didn't get around to teaching skills at all—found that their children achieved as well in reading as those locked in basal reading programs without the opportunity to *use* the skills they were developing. Of course, the choice doesn't have to be either/or. Teachers should use the basal program for what it is worth—consistent, sequential skill development—and use library books for what they contribute—enjoyable application and practice of those reading skills.

Some might point out that library books are not high interest/low vocabulary materials: they tend to be written at about the level to which they appeal. While this is true, there are means of attracting older readers to easy books when they can't read at a higher level. Some very successful techniques have been to ask older students to review primary books for the younger children. Another means has been to ask older students if they'd like to examine first and second grade books to see what they look like to them now that they are "grown up." In fact, any excuse teachers find to take the stigma off of reading "baby books" will guarantee success of this kind of library reading with older students. People of any age can enjoy easy reading books if they don't need to be ashamed of being caught reading them. Besides, how does one develop fluency—ease of reading—unless it is in material *below* instructional level.

Conclusion

In summary, I have tried to point out what research and common sense seem to be saying: We have good readers on treadmills getting better and better; we have poor readers on treadmills getting worse and worse. Yet, we can reverse the trend of the poor readers by using a few of the research-supported techniques suggested here; we can help poor readers become aware that reading is a meaning-getting act by:

1. providing more silent and less oral reading, thereby furnishing more experience in reading and more emphasis on meaning as opposed to word accuracy;

2. ensuring proper placement so students *can* read the material and attain some success and fluency in reading;
3. providing practice in comprehension by asking questions in the inferential and critical reading categories as opposed to the literal, thereby encouraging more sophisticated thinking;
4. supporting pupil response through adequate wait time;
5. teaching as well as giving practice in the comprehension skills;
6. providing time to read—time that leads to real reading and to enjoyment of that reading.

In effect, poor readers are touching bits and pieces of the elephant without ever feeling—much less seeing—the whole thing. Yet the poor readers are not the blind men; we merely have them blindfolded. Let's remove the blindfolds so they can see the whole elephant. Let's pretend they are our good readers awhile. We might be pleasantly surprised at the result.

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