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TRENDS IN READING

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The literature on reading, both professional and popular, is so vast, it's difficult to know just exactly what to think about how we're doing these days with reading instruction. The general public, of course, is absolutely convinced that people can't read nearly as well now as they used to; but if you ask those who say this to document the statement, they really can't. As a matter of fact, given the vastness of the literature and the complexity of verifying reading trends and levels, it seems difficult to say anything about reading for absolutely sure at all.

However, the prevailing public view of reading levels and the complexity of the problem notwithstanding, it is possible to make some general statements about what the literature seems to say about reading on a national basis. First, in spite of the popular view, reading achievement at all grade levels appears to be gradually improving, and this gradual improvement seems to have been going on for many years. People who think otherwise will, if they try to, really have difficulty documenting their more negative point of view. Apparently our increasing sophistication in reading instruction is at least slowly paying off.

Second, the literature seems to suggest that basic literacy among students who are in school is relatively high. Thus, especially if you consider students at the upper grade levels, relatively few of them are unable to decode - or say - the specific words and to comprehend at a low level. Most of us would agree that "saying the words" is not reading; but if this ability is used as the criterion, which it often is, basic literacy is, it would appear, fairly high.

In spite of the above, though, some groups of students are reading very poorly by almost any criterion, including the "word-saying" one. These groups of students are to be found particularly within the inner-city poor. In fact, the great challenge in reading these days is trying

to get these students up to at least minimal reading standards.

Another trend suggested in the literature seems to be that lower-grade reading ability is increasing slightly more rapidly than at the upper grades. This might seem to be encouraging, except for the fact the early-level skills that students seem to more easily acquire tend to be specific decoding skills - the ones that are perhaps easier to teach and easier to learn. But when the focus of reading becomes comprehension, as it does on the upper levels, and applying and using reading skills, that's where the trouble comes.

The last trend that I'll mention here is that higher-level reading skills - for example, making inferences about what is read and reading at a critical and creative level - may indeed be declining at all levels. Thus, if you are talking about the ability to really read - that is, to read critically, inferentially, evaluatively, and the like, our students may not be doing all that well these days.

Another point that may be made here is that one reason reading levels appear to be declining is that our reading expectations are going up. As the Resnicks pointed out in a fascinating article in the August, 1977, *Harvard Review*, entitled "The Nature of Literacy: an Historic Exploration," in years past, reading comprehension wasn't even particularly expected. Children were indeed taught to virtually recite the words and internalize them by rote. Today, we expect students to not just recite, but to understand and even be critical.

What is expected of the reader today came home to me a few months ago when I tried to get on the new subway in Washington. In order to get on this rather fabulous new conveyance, you first have to read an extremely difficult sign-board filled with a detailed explanation of where to put your money to get a particular kind of ticket. I finally gave up and asked a sympathetic passerby. I failed the reading test. Yet that is the kind of reading we are more and more expected to do. No

wonder it appears our reading levels are declining.

In any case, how do State Assessment data relate to these national trends? Well, if one looks at the results from 1974 to the present, State Assessment seems to confirm some of these trends. In 1974, slightly over 21 percent of the fourth graders in the state were mastering less than 24 percent of the reading objectives (as measured by State Assessment), while in 1977, only 14 percent of the fourth graders failed to master this percentage of the objectives. On the other hand, in 1974, only 48 percent of the fourth graders were mastering at least 75 percent of the objectives, while in 1977, slightly over 60 percent were. A parallel positive trend is to be found at the seventh grade level. Thus, the trend in reading, at least as measured by State Assessment, is quite clearly on the positive side.

But the trend should not lull anyone into a comfortable state. Large numbers of students still are not coming up to even minimal levels; and when higher-level reading skills are considered - skills that are not covered in a minimal testing program - we can assume that progress may not be all that great.

Speaking of State Assessment data, the Department of Education is making a great effort to get the data out to districts in forms that people will find useful. One packet is prepared for the district as a whole, another for the building, and another for the teacher. We've tried to think of every way to make the presentation of the data helpful; and if anyone has any suggestions for making the packets still better, we'd be very much interested in these suggestions.

Some other comments on reading. Personally, I think a major problem in reading is that we don't do a good enough job of motivating students to *want* to read. It's an uphill battle, of course, with our society's general disinclination for the printed word. But, still, if anyone is

to become a good reader - that is, to develop higher-level comprehension skills, it seems clear s/he has to do a lot of reading.

Thus, it's hard to imagine a good reading program that doesn't include the library and the use of general reading materials. On the other hand, one's ability to read well does seem to vary somewhat from area to area, so that one person may read romantic fiction with a high degree of comprehension, but will read technical material at a much lower level; while for another person, it'll be just the opposite. It's important, therefore, to provide students reading material in a variety of areas and within their interest areas.

Related to this, it's apparent that reading should not be taught only through the "reading book." Reading can just as well be taught through social studies, science, mathematics, health education, or whatever. In fact, given the difficulty some youngsters have of transferring their "reading-book" reading skills to their science book or the social studies books, reading should be taught via these other areas. The irony is that sometimes in our zeal to do a better job of teaching reading, the reading books (and all those skill sheets) have driven other reading materials (and other subject areas) out of the curriculum. When this happens, the application of reading skills gets tragically neglected. At least, this is my view.

Besides revising the reading objectives, we are also revising (and, I think, much improving) the speaking/listening objectives. We're hoping that an improved set of these objectives will have a positive effect on this essential part of the school curriculum. I say essential because a lot of people think - and I agree - that verbal skills are absolutely crucial to the development of reading skills. Yet, again, the more we focus on reading skills per se and exclude speaking and listening skills from the curriculum, the more we unintentionally work against the student's eventual ability to read well.



CALL FOR PAPERS

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Potential presenters should submit a one-page abstract of workshop, paper, or symposia presentation in any of the following areas:

- * Methods of Teaching Reading
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(all levels)
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- * Adult Education
- * Back-to-Basics Movement
- * Reading for the Advanced and/or Gifted
- * Remedial Reading Techniques for the Mentally Impaired
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Abstracts should be sent no later than April 15, 1978, to:

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NEW FROM IRA:

The Kindergarten Child and Reading

Because segments of reading instruction have begun to move from the first grade into the kindergarten curriculum, educators have been faced with questions about the nature of reading instruction and its appropriateness for kindergarten. *The Kindergarten Child and Reading*, edited by Lloyd Ollila of the University of Victoria, seeks to deal with some of these questions.

This book is written for the kindergarten teacher interested in helping children become acquainted with reading, developing skills in preparation for beginning reading, and guiding those who are reading or wish to learn to read. Sections deal with facts about pre-first grade reading, readiness, the fostering of interest and achievement, organization of individ-

ualized instruction, and kindergarten materials.

"Kindergarten teachers play a unique role in the child's development. We hope this book will help them meet this challenge with greater enthusiasm and insight," says Ollila in his introduction. Contributing authors are: Durkin, Robinson, Strickland, Cullinan, Schulwitz, Nurss, Ollila, and Dey.

The Kindergarten Child and Reading may be purchased at a cost of \$2.50 for individual Association members and \$4.00 for others from the Order Department, International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, Newark, Delaware 19711, U.S.A. Also available is a free publications catalog.

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"I am thx kxy pxrson in our group, and I am nxxdxd vxry much."

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