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The Leadership Role of a Reading Consultant

by Doris Kilanski

One of the most dynamic changes to take place in recent public school education has been the evolution of the reading teacher into the person of the reading consultant. No doubt the availability of funds from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has been responsible for the exterior mechanics for this change. The motivating force, however, could well have been the years of frustration experienced by reading teachers as they attempted to bring about long-range success by using short-range methods.

The most frequent short-range method used was the "band-aid method." This band-aid technique, that of going from school to school twice a week to spend fifteen minutes with classes of slow reading children, developed very few strong reading habits. As a stop-gap method, it was passable, just as a strip of bandage soothes the hurt and keeps germs away from the sore for the time being. But "band-aids" have never been known to heal deep-rooted ailments, in medicine or in reading instruction.

The reading teachers knew there had to be a better way, classroom teachers likewise had little faith in the twice a week

efforts of the reading teacher, and the administrators listened to complaints from both the reading teachers and the classroom teachers. They too did not know what to do. In 1965 the E.S.E.A. funds became available! Under the able leadership of many Title I directors reading teachers were emancipated from the stop-gap methods of instruction. The image of a reading teacher, trekking from school to school with brief case, boxes of books, Gray Oral forms, and a prayer that he would be welcome and wanted, gave way to the more sophisticated, albeit more utilitarian, concept of the reading consultant.

That such a developmental change should take place within the nation's public school systems during a period of not more than two years, can be attributed to many facts. It has been estimated that about 80% of the Title I money of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has been used for strengthening local reading programs. Thus, with more adequate supplies, an increased number of reading consultants, and expanded services to classroom teachers, many programs have grown from those of questionable effectiveness to those of measurable success.

Another important reason for the emergence of quality reading consultants, besides the flow of federal funds into local school systems, has been the personal initiative on the part of the reading personnel to upgrade themselves. Many teachers have gone back to college to increase their four years of study to five, or their five years to six. Many reading consultants now hold

the specialized degree in reading which is offered at universities throughout the country. Then too there has been a steady absorption of public school consultants into university faculties where they serve as excellent sources of information and understanding to future teachers and consultants. This drain is hard on public schools, but the dividend it pays in returning sensitive, knowledgeable the elementary and secondary education fields makes up for the temporary void it creates.

The reading consultant is now an established, an accepted member of faculties in schools of all sizes throughout our country. He is regarded as a resource person, a specialist in the area of reading instruction. Thus he is expected to act as a leader to other educators in this specialized area. Because he is an educational leader he has responsibilities that extend beyond those of teachers with a lesser extension of influence.

As the reading consultant contemplates his leadership role

there are four important considerations of which he should now be cognizant.

First, the reading consultant should not lose the capacity nor the necessity to learn more about his subject. There is just so much that can be understood at this time about the base mechanics of the reading process, but these base mechanics he must know extremely well. His knowledge must probe much deeper than that. The reading consultant must continually study the behavioral aspects of learning, the social implications of being a poor reader, the guidance that these children need as well as reading skills, the distorted perceptions these children have of themselves, the physical disabilities that sometimes hinder real progress. Whether the consultant reads avidly, attends seminars and workshops, or continues to study advanced work at a university is his decision, but he has a grave responsibility to ever increase his awareness and understanding of children.

Second, it is the responsibility of the reading consultant to keep abreast of the ever-increasing developments in the field of reading instruction. The publication explosion we will have with us a long time. Because of its magnitude the task for the reading consultant becomes more difficult daily. In his efforts to sift, scrutinize, make judgments and recommendations in an educated manner he will often be baffled and frustrated. This task requires

time, attention and astuteness that almost calls for divine wisdom. Nevertheless it is the grave duty of the reading consultant to make reliable recommendations to the classroom teachers, the administrators, the curriculum coordinators, or others in the school system who ask for his advice.

Third, the reading consultant should always consider himself as one who serves others and thus be available to them. The classroom teachers have very little free time during a school day so it will be necessary to schedule a meeting or make an appointment with them. For reading consultants to take these appointments lightly and to miss them with impunity would be a mistake. The decline of the effectiveness of the reading consultant would be both swift and decisive. It is perhaps wise to go one step beyond and suggest that the reading consultant not only keep his appointments, but his availabilities should be conspicuous.

Fourth, the service which reading consultants extend to other educators and children should be outstanding for its promptness. When a curriculum coordinator requests information about a series of books, when an administrator is looking for advice about buying supplementary books for the

non-graded Level III, when the classroom teacher would like some special material for one of her disabled readers, there can be only one response, "Yes, Sir. Right away, Sir!" These services are needed by these educators if they are to serve the children with whom they work. As educational leader in his field

of reading instruction it is the job of the reading consultant to see that other educators have the materials they need, when they need them.

Now is perhaps a time for reading consultants to breathe deeply, roll up their sleeves and plunge into the task at hand, the task of being a consultant, a specialist, and a leader in the field of reading instruction. No longer should so many children sit, vegetate, or corrode because nobody really knows what to do with them. There is now a cooperative member of the educating team who has an idea of where to start. He will not apply a band-aid, pat the child on the head and send him back to Miss Perplexed to try to find an answer for this particular child. The reading consultant will not always be right, sometimes not even remotely so, but he is more likely to be right than wrong.

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