

A DESCRIPTION OF INSTRUCTION IN THE READING OF ASSIGNED MATERIALS IN EIGHTH GRADE SOCIAL STUDIES AND LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOMS

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This study is an outgrowth of two papers presented at the American Reading Forum in December, 1980. The first was a study (Hesse, Bullock, and Chin, 1980) in which a product-centered approach to reading comprehension was discussed. This approach focused not upon a series of skills, but on "those products of reading that teachers will accept as evidence that the material is being read and students are gaining meaning from the material." Reading for meaning is seen as active reading, and the behaviors of students so engaged are defined as active reading behaviors. This follows Goodman's model (1970) of reading that looks at meaning as the end product of the reading process.

The authors cite important reasons for acceptance of this approach to content area reading. First, this approach allows teachers to be more specific about what they need to do in order to help students with reading the material. If they know what behaviors to expect from a student who is reading, teachers will be better able to help the student learn to exhibit those behaviors. For example, if the ability to summarize can be accepted as evidence that the student has read and understood a passage, the teacher can (1) observe whether students can summarize, and (2) devise strategies for helping those who cannot. "These products of active reading would appear to be more manageable and remove some of the mysticism from the teaching of reading in the content areas" (Hesse, Bullock, and Chin, 1981).

In the second paper (Hesse and Slinger, 1980), a model was developed by which baseline data could be collected with regard to the amount and type of active reading behaviors (pupil reading pursuits) that might be observed in the content area classroom. "At the present time, reading educators and school administrators lack a clear set of expected/desired student behaviors in content area reading. In addition, we have no way of assessing the teaching of these reading behaviors. Hopefully, the framework we describe will be a step toward gathering data that will be helpful in reviewing and setting defensible policy in secondary content area reading instruction" (Hesse and Slinger, 1981).

Reason for the Study

One of the major concerns of education continues to be the apparent decline in reading competency among high school graduates. This concern has led to an increased emphasis on "back to basics," and has served to expand the area of responsibility for reading instruction from the exclusive domain of the elementary school reading class to every situation where reading assignments are required. Since these situations include secondary classrooms, a new emphasis has been placed on reading at the secondary level.

Twenty-eight states now mandate that preservice instruction for all secondary teachers shall include attention to reading in the content area (Thomas and Simpson, 1979). These mandates are based on the following assumptions:

1. The range of reading levels in a given classroom can span many grade levels. Few schools can afford to hire reading teachers to accommodate every student whose skills need improvement. The most economical way of providing

this instruction is to include it in the students' regular classes.

2. Even students who can decode every word in their text may sometimes fail to grasp the meanings of new and unfamiliar concepts that are presented in the reading assignment. Each subject area contains a vast number of concepts that the student need to learn. The content area teacher cannot hope to teach them all. The best a teacher can do is to help students acquire the skills necessary for independent learning.
3. Reading skills taught in the laboratory setting do not automatically transfer to the situation where they are to be used. Each skill should be taught or reinforced in the content area reading assignment where it is needed.

However, as Palmer (1975) suggests, many teachers hold the view that "the teaching of reading in the content area is an esoteric mystery to be solved only by the reading specialist" (p. 43). These teachers believe that before they can help students learn to read, they must be trained as reading specialists. Secondary teachers often view reading as a set of skills that must be taught prior to content area instruction. This view allows them to see only the remedial aspect of reading instruction, and since they have not usually been trained in remedial reading, they feel inadequately prepared to meet the challenge. This lack of confidence in their ability to teach reading, coupled with the increasing demands for reading instruction, can create negative attitudes on the part of these teachers which, in turn, can affect student performance. A change in these attitudes may occur when teachers learn to view reading as a tool needed to facilitate the learning of content, and not as an intrusion into their own domain. The building of competence in reading instruction and the improvement of attitude can come about through well-designed inservice programs. However, before these programs can meet the needs of teachers, they must be based on a knowledge of what is presently happening in the secondary content area classrooms. Educators must know the specific things that teachers do to assist students in reading content area assignments. It was in response to this need for information about secondary reading instruction that this study was designed.

Since there was no effective instrument available, one was designed for this study which is capable of collecting information about the kind, quantity and duration of content area reading activities that might be observed in these secondary classroom.

Building the Framework

Step 1. In order to build a framework it was first necessary to define content area reading in terms of classroom activities. Initially, a series of classrooms were observed and all activities recorded. These activities were placed into categories labeled reading pursuits, content instruction, and non-instruction. Reading pursuits were then sub-grouped as active reading pursuits, passive reading pursuits, and oblique reading pursuits. Each of these in turn was clarified as additional subsets of pursuits were identified.

- I. Non Reading Related Pursuits
 - A. Teaching-learning content
 - B. Non instructional
- II. Reading Related Pursuits
 - A. Active Reading Pursuits
 1. Pre teach reading vocabulary
 2. Pre teach reading or study skills
 3. Providing background information for reading
 4. Student reads with direct teacher instruction
 5. Student practices skills or shows evidence of active reading behaviors taught
 - B. Passive Reading Pursuits
 1. Student reads silently using teacher prepared study material

2. Student reads silently using non-teacher prepared material
- C. Oblique Reading Pursuits
 1. Student reads orally
 2. Teacher reads orally
 3. Skills taught in isolation
 4. Review, assessment of reading

To qualify as an active reading pursuit, an activity must take place in preparation for, or during, reading. The reading must be done in content related material and direct instruction must be given by the teacher.

Passive reading pursuits are those in which students are engaged in a reading activity for which no preparation or direct instruction is given. Material may or may not relate to content.

Oblique pursuits are those which are only indirectly related to content area reading or whose relationship is obscure. These activities lack one or more of the qualifications for active reading pursuits. For example, reading skills may be taught independent of any subject matter assignments; students or teacher may read orally without attention to reading behaviors, or the interaction may take place after the student has read the material.

Step 2. Once the activities which would be accepted as the active, passive, or oblique reading pursuits were identified and defined, an observational scale was designed. Since the data analysis was to involve the computation of percentages of total class time spent in teaching reading, a continuous real time measurement system was used. This type of measurement occurs when every duration of behavior is recorded during an observation session. Probe sampling was considered as a coding strategy, but rejected because it is insensitive in detecting activities which occur infrequently. In teaching a reading skill, duration of that instruction may be more meaningful than frequency. Merely "mentioning" the meaning of a vocabulary item may rate a frequency count, but may do little to help students learn the word. The coding instructions were designed to make recording as simple as possible. Time was recorded at the beginning of each new activity. The categorization scheme allowed observers to be objective about the coding of pursuits; this kept observer inference at a minimum and enhanced observer agreement. Data extracted from each observation included: (1) the type of activity that was observed, (2) the frequency and duration of each, and (3) who participated in the activity.

Method

Subjects of the study were all eighth grade language arts and social studies classrooms in one local school district. In the four middle schools in this district, eighth grade language arts and social studies classes are combined into two-period blocks. Thirteen teachers are responsible for teaching these blocks; each teacher teaches both the social studies and language arts classes of a block. In most instances, the block is treated by teachers as two separate subjects, and no attempt is made to integrate the curriculum of the two subjects.

Six graduate students in education were recruited and trained to conduct the observations. A manual was prepared to assist observers with defining and categorizing the reading activities. Observers randomly selected the times during which the observations would be made within a given period of time.

Results

Major findings from the data are as follows:

1. Total observed time for the four schools was 3546.5 minutes, or 59.1 hours. Less than 0.9% of the total observed time was spent in active reading pursuits. This represented an average time of five minutes for each two-period block. Block times ranged from 80 to 100 minutes.

2. In the observed classrooms, reading made up 51% of the average eighth grade student's class time. The largest portion of this time (28.1% or 998.6 minutes) was spent in silent reading, mainly written assignments, in which students read a text and answered questions about what they had read or worked on written reports. Oblique reading behaviors made up another 17.4% of this 51% figure. These findings confirmed the observations of Durkin (1978) in whose study written assignments dominated the teaching scene.
3. Five percent of the total observed time was devoted to content area reading instruction, with the majority of this time being spent in "Student Reads, Teacher Provides Instruction." Very little time was spent in preteaching vocabulary or preteaching reading skills (0.8% or 27.3 minutes), although several teachers provided background information before the students read.
4. Non-instructional activities consumed 15% of the time, nearly three times as much of the observed time as content area reading instruction.
5. One school accounted for more than half of the reading instruction observed. In this school, 14% of the total class time was devoted to reading instruction, and all teachers spent some time in these activities. Block teachers spend time working together to plan their language arts/social studies classes, and some of this planning time is spent developing methods for helping students read the assignments.
6. Eighteen percent of the teachers were able to approximate the amount of time that they would spend in preparing students to read homework assignments. The teachers who estimated correctly predicted that they would spend no time on this activity, and, in fact, they did not. Thirty-one percent of the teachers were able to give a good estimation of the amount of time that they would spend preparing students for, or helping students with, in-class reading assignments.
7. Teachers with five years or less of teaching experience provided twice the amount of reading instruction as teachers with more than five years' experience.

Implications for Educational Practice

The definition of reading that places emphasis on "teaching content" rather than on "teaching skills" adds a new perspective to secondary reading programs. Teachers may now view reading, not as a separate subject, but as a tool needed to facilitate the learning of a content. It would seem that content area teachers would be uniquely qualified to provide students with motivation and purpose for reading in the field that they have chosen. Since it is assumed that content teachers can read well the material of their subject, they are also qualified to recognize the reading behaviors that indicate that a student is (or is not) handling the material efficiently. "As sophisticated learners, they know how to read selectively—how to distinguish key ideas from supportive evidence; major from minor points" (Cunningham, p. 380). Teaching reading skills in the situation in which they are used is economical, since this type of instruction utilizes the training that the teachers have already received.

This view of reading also shifts some of the duties of the reading specialist from teaching classes of remedial reading students to providing resources and information on reading to the rest of the teaching staff. As Robinson (1975) pointed out, "Certainly reading or language arts specialists are aware that reading cannot be set aside as an isolated entity; they know that the reading process(es) can only exist in relationship to content" (p. 3).

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