

**TEACHING MULTI-AGE LEVEL ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL STUDENTS COMPREHENSION SKILLS
THROUGH A SELF-DIRECTED SOCIAL STUDIES
LEARNING PACKET**

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The ability to comprehend is essential to student success in all curricular areas. Reading instruction is too important to be confined to one segment of the school day. Educators are realizing that while reading classes are vital for skill development, specific reading skills may not be transferring to other subject areas. Witty (1962) believes the teacher of every subject has a responsibility for helping the child to read the varied materials employed in instruction, for developing special vocabulary, building concepts, for cultivating critical reading and for fostering reading from varied sources. The use of reading skills is essential in the attainment of knowledge in the area of the social sciences. An analysis of the literature on the transfer of training reveals that transfer cannot be relied upon to achieve reading competence in content area subjects (Carney, 1977). Many teachers may recognize the value of content area reading instruction or be aware of its value, but teachers may not know how to incorporate it into their own classrooms. Some teachers have expressed concern about the frustration which students of lower reading ability exhibit when they cannot cope with the tasks of active learning. Perhaps some of this fear is that action-oriented practices make management and control more difficult. Grading students is often another problem inherent in an action-type program.

Reading is an activity that is distinguished by the content and purpose for what is being read. A concern is whether basic reading materials stimulate the type of reading that is required in the academic content areas. Studies by Stauffer (1966) and Willmon (1975) suggest that typical basal material provide a child with less than half the words necessary to comprehend the technical concepts in content materials. The writing patterns, the variance in vocabulary load and organizational structure, and the conceptual load differs greatly between reading materials and content materials. Johnson (1977) found that education in readability level appeared to have no impact on the conceptual difficulty.

Riley (1980) states that two important goals of teaching reading in the content areas are the acquisition of content area concepts and of the learner acquiring strategies which lead to the understanding of the concepts. The strategies utilized by the student will in most cases depend upon the techniques presented to the learner by the teacher.

Utilizing the process of curriculum development has ramifications for the content area teacher. First, it is very important to diagnose where the students are in relation to the material: Do they know some of the concepts? Can they comprehend the vocabulary in the selections? Are they equipped with the necessary reading skills required in the level of materials which will be used?

The literature reflects, "For too long we teachers have

labored under the naive assumption that if we assign ten pages for the next day, the student will know exactly what to do with them" (Duke and Powers, 1973). It is essential to remember that we are there to guide the students in their learning in the content area. The crucial factor is how we guide the student through the material in the required subject, allowing "personal strengths, preferences, and discoveries to emerge" (Herber, 1970).

The keys to learning and retention in the content areas appear to be: an interest in learning on the part of the student; a schema into which new information may be assimilated; active involvement by the student in the search for meaning; a synthesis and reorganization of what is learned; and an application of what was learned.

The purpose of this paper is to present an alternate instructional technique to teaching comprehension skills to multi-age level children through self-directed social studies learning packets. The types of questions and activities required of the students contain statements at three levels of comprehension—literal, interpretative, and applied. Although a well-planned guide cannot solve all the problems of one class, it can provide many benefits for the students and teacher. The students in this sample are 9-11 years old and attend the University Laboratory School at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Because the students in this school participate in many extra-curricular activities they are prevented from being consistently available for large group social studies instruction. Through a self-pacing module approach, students are provided an opportunity to gain practical experience through an integrated reading and study skills approach to social studies. The utilization of packets was conceived as a way to be of most benefit to the students and the teacher.

Tutolo (1977) believes one of the major values of a study guide is that it increases reading time, which enhances comprehension. It also provides the student with a structured approach to the material. McClain (1981) suggests that a study guide is a more flexible structure to assist the student in more efficient reading. A step-by-step procedure is given for studying the material to be learned. The idea of a study guide in this paper has been expanded into complete learning packets on the East, the South, and the Northwest and allows a flexible structure to assist the student in more efficient use of his learning and reading. In this type of approach the teacher works as a monitor, facilitator, and evaluator. The teacher must be well-organized, flexible, and possess good management skills.

The learning packets consist of questions and activities incorporating multi-media aids such as filmstrips, records, transparencies, library books, and social studies textbooks. The students are permitted to work alone or in a small group. If a student is a poor reader, he often elects to become part of a group in which there are good readers. The student is required periodically to meet individually or in small groups with the teacher to check his progress and for evaluation purposes. This innovative approach at the elementary school level is a means of developing independent research, organizational, and reading comprehension skills. (In addition to the use of packets, the students complete a map and globe skills unit and view related films in a large group followed by discussion.)

The approach described in this paper was used with 17 students in grade five and with 15 students in grade four during 1980-81 school year. The students were tested at the end of the year (1980-81) on the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS).

Because of the small number of students in the laboratory school, one-third of those students in the 9-11 years age group (grades 4 and 5) were participants in the program using packets. The students were ranked using grade equivalent scores on the total reading and the social studies scores on the CTBS.

The results indicated that the majority of the students with a

high grade equivalent score in social studies were also the same students with a high grade equivalent in the total reading score. The results revealed a similar pattern for students in grades four and five. In essence those students who did well in reading comprehension were the same students who did well in social studies.

In conclusion, the use of a self-directed learning packet as a method for helping students become independent in their studying and application of skills and as a teaching technique to meet a scheduling situation proved to have value as an instructional technique. One value of the packet approach is that it teaches students how to learn. It sets a purpose for reading, allows students to relate to the material, and helps them to evaluate information. As with any new method, the students using this approach must fully understand the responsibilities placed upon them for their own learning. It cannot be concluded, however, that this approach alone contributed to the child's increase in comprehension ability. Further research using more sophisticated measures for evaluation and control needs to be conducted before the correlation between the packets approach and an increase in comprehension can be concluded.

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