

READING HABITS AND PATTERNS OF IN-SERVICE READING TEACHERS IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOL SETTINGS

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The model of literacy presented by the regular classroom teacher is highly suspected to be a major factor influencing students' behavior as they are taught to read. Teachers who present a literate model to which their students can aspire often influence the subsequent reading behavior of their students. The result is that students can readily deduce that reading is not simply a school tool, but a skill needed for life long survival. Given this information, a survey of regular classroom teachers' reading habits seems an appropriate vantage point for beginning to think about both pre-service and in-service training which will include insurance that the products of our teacher training institutions will at least be literate.

As early as 1973, Zahorik warned of the possible relationship between the teacher's own reading values and the achievement of his/her students. Speaking somewhat disparagingly, he wrote, "By their own attitudes and behaviors some teachers communicate to students that reading is an unimportant activity..." (Zahorik, p. 56). Cogan (1975) subsequently studied elementary school teachers and concluded that they did little professional reading and that those journals which they did read were most often of a pragmatic nature. More recently, Joseph and Polonsky surveyed both secondary teachers and elementary teachers and concluded among their findings that elementary teachers spent more of their leisure time activities listening to the radio or viewing T.V., as opposed to reading (Joseph & Polonsky, 1981, p. 15). If such a dismal picture exists as a matter of fact among elementary school teachers of reading, can in-service or pre-service offer a remedy?

This present research was designed to survey the reading behavior of elementary school teachers also involved in supervision of practicum students who were enrolled in reading course work leading to initial certification as elementary teachers in grades N-6. Following the survey, the results were examined against the questions posed by Rath to determine if individuals valued reading (Rath, 1966, p. 27). This plan was employed as a means of collecting the desired data with some degree of indirectness, while at the same time testing the validity of the instrument used. Asking teachers questions in a more direct manner might facilitate teachers who, like their students, have learned to supply the "right" answer.

In order to accomplish this design, 38 male and female classroom teachers of reading were asked to respond to a modified version of the questionnaire designed for the study by Joseph and Polonsky (1981). Those individuals choosing to respond to the questionnaire were regular classroom teachers who taught all subjects in addition to reading to children in grades 1-2, in both public and private school settings.

One hundred and twenty questionnaires were distributed to those students who were engaged in course-related field work in reading during the early days of October, 1981. Of those teachers approached, eighty-two or, 68 percent, refused to respond. The most often given reason for their refusal had to do with their doubts relative to the subjectivity of the survey instrument. One prospective respondent was heard to reply, "It's just another way to establish that we are illiterate, and I simply will not do it." The thirty-eight, four male, and twenty female, who did agree to respond represented a return of thirty-one (31) percent. Of the thirty-eight completed surveys, fifty-five (55) percent were college graduates, and forty-four point seven (44.7) percent had attended graduate school. Sixteen, of forty-two (42) percent, of these were married without children,

while fifteen, or thirty-nine point four (39.4) percent, were married with children. Fourteen, or thirty-six point eight (36.8) percent, taught in inner-city schools, and twenty-four, or sixty-three point two (63.2) percent, were suburban teachers.

Analysis of the data according to the stated plan suggests the following:

In response to Rath's first criterion, "Do you choose freely to read?", item 1 of the survey questionnaire was used to generalize about teachers' responses. In this respect, the largest number of respondents listed their reasons for reading as being for recreation, professional development, and information about current events, and in that order.

In response to Rath's second criterion, "Do you choose reading from among alternatives (such as T.V., movies, cards, and so forth)?", item 12 of the survey questionnaire was used. Fourteen, or thirty-six point eight (36.8) percent indicated that they spent the major portion of their leisure time watching T.V., while eleven, or 28.9 percent chose to read. This finding is not unlike that reached by Mueller (1973) who determined that the teachers she studied placed a similar low value on reading as a leisure activity. It also represents a similar conclusion drawn from the work already mentioned in the reporting by Joseph and Polonsky (1981, p. 16). In their study, they indicated that elementary teachers spent most of their time watching T.V. as opposed to reading. In this study, as with the study above, teachers chose to watch T.V. because they said, "It freed them to do housework and other things at the same time."

In response to Rath's third criterion, "Do you choose reading thoughtfully with knowledge of the consequences of each alternative?", items 2 through 11 of the survey questionnaire were employed to generalize about possible teacher responses. According to the survey, most of the respondents read between three and four magazines per month while twenty-two, or fifty-seven point nine (57.9) percent read from one to ten books monthly. Nine, or twenty-three point seven (23.7) percent admitted to reading from eleven to twenty books monthly. Two male and one female said that they had read more than fifty books during the last six months, while only two respondents read as many as eight different magazines during the same time period.

Of the types of books read, short stories, language, books of fiction, books about sex, health and text books were chosen by more than eighty (80) percent of all surveyed. Closely following these choices were preferences for books relative to the social sciences, seventy-three point three (73.3) percent; The Bible, seventy-one (71) percent; mysteries, seventy-one (71) percent; autobiographies, seventy-one (71) percent; general references, seventy-one (71) percent; and books about history and geography, sixty-seven point five (67.5) percent. This would seem to concur with the possibility that teachers read to support their professional growth even during their leisure time, a conclusion also researched in a similar study of elementary teachers by Mour (1977).

The above data would suggest that teachers choose their reading with some concern for job related utility. While only fourteen, or thirty-six point eight (36.8) percent of the respondents admitted to spending as much as five or more hours for reading for pleasure per week, and eight, or twenty-one (21) percent said that they spent five hours or more for work related reading, there is little to suggest that teachers of elementary school children spend a great deal of time reading quality literature or professional books and magazines. While this sample was small, it seems difficult to conceive of only three teachers who regularly read either, *The Reading Teacher* or the *Journal of Reading*.

To respond to Rath's criterion, "Do you prize reading—hold it dear?", data generalized from the results of items 2 and 10 of the survey questionnaire were utilized. According to the information taken from these sections, only ten (10) percent of the teachers surveyed belonged to book clubs. The small number

together with the lack of membership in professional organizations related to reading offers little ground to declare that teachers in this study valued reading according to this specific criteria.

In response to Rath's fifth criterion, "Are you glad to be associated with it—do you publicly affirm your attitude towards reading?", data from items 5 and 10 of the questionnaire were used. This data also supported the conclusions reached in the fourth criterion discussion. Seventy-three point five (73.5) percent of those surveyed said that they read one or more professional magazines such as those from the NEA, but only three respondents mentioned reading either *The Reading Teacher* or the *Journal of Reading*. Five, or fourteen point eight (14.8) percent of the respondents named other professional magazines. Since membership in professional organizations is a form of public affirmation of an individual's beliefs and values, the respondents in this survey may be said to act in ways that do not affirm their love of reading.

Rath's sixth criterion, "Do you act out upon your choices, that is, do you fact read?", was answered using items 10 and 7 of the survey questionnaire. The respondents might well be said to read for factual acquisition. Again, the choices of books about health, text books, the preference for books about hobbies, the social sciences, history, geography, general information all indicate fact type reading. Almost eighty-nine (89) percent of those surveyed also read newspapers, local and nationwide.

Rath's final criterion, "Do you have a pattern of reading?", was answered by the data obtained from the entire survey questionnaire. The instrument readily lent itself to revealing such a pattern when the behavior of each respondent was viewed in relationship to the group. All respondents indicated a pattern of regular reading even though patterns of individual respondents differed.

The results of this study indicate that a high level of correlation may exist when the survey instrument's results are interpreted against the Rath (1966) paradigm for determining if teachers valued reading. While the survey instrument provides little information relative to the quality of what teachers commonly read, it does present evidence which suggest that socialization towards reading as one avenue of leisure time activity is evident in the lives of in-service educators.

That only twenty-eight point nine (28.9) percent of those surveyed in this study chosen reading as their preferred leisure activity concurs with the conclusion reached by similar researchers of the past. This finding is particularly disturbing when one considers that thirty-four, or eighty-nine point five (89.5) percent, listed "recreation" as their main purpose for reading. Where in-service and pre-service education is concerned, we might very well consider how this information should affect teacher training programs designed to improve the effectiveness of reading teachers.

It seems ludicrous to expect our school-aged children to develop life long habits of reading quality literature if their teachers in the early grades don't. After all, almost our entire plans for schooling depend heavily upon the powerful role of the teacher as model and chief socializer of the young. When teachers themselves do not read, it hardly seems likely that they will produce students who will.

Finally, the important role of literature, especially children's literature, in the appropriate socialization of our nation's youth is undeniable. Children, especially the poor and culturally different, still depend upon it as the only source whereby they can learn first hand of the curriculum of rules and regulations which govern our society (Jackson, 1968). If teachers of these youth show students by their action that they place a low value on this important medium, where else can we turn to assure improved national literacy and life long habits of reading among all of our people?

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