

"The picture in the majority of schools was (not) encouraging. Whatever enthusiasm for reading might have developed in the earlier years, the survey revealed a narrowing in the scope and quality of reading by most pupils . . . in nearly all schools there were some subjects in which books played scarcely any part. It was frequently taken for granted that pupils could develop without help their skills of reading for different purposes . . ."

Their statement seems to echo some familiar descriptions leveled at reading in subject areas in the U.S.A. A decision was made to find out how educators in various European countries perceived their students with regard to reading and comprehending printed material.

An opportunity to observe schools and interview personnel in England and Scotland emerged when an assignment was made to accompany Ball State Ex-El-Overseas Teacher Education group studying in England.

The decision was made to visit several countries and to observe one or two schools in each. This allowed for a composite concept of schools in Europe rather than a more intensive examination of education and reading in a particular country.

Data Collection

Schools in *England* and *Scotland* were visited initially while Ball State students were participating in British schools. Visits were then arranged to observe and interview educators in secondary schools in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, West Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Ireland, Belgium and Luxembourg.

In the U.S. visits included high schools, community colleges and technical vocational schools in California, Arizona, Texas, Colorado, Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Louisiana and Georgia.

Findings

Data from 18 schools in 15 European countries and 18 schools in this country are included in this report. Responses regarding perceptions of student reading in literature, science, social studies, mathematics, homemaking and industrial arts were summarized for 86 educators in Europe and 96 in the U.S.A.

- I. The form outlining the information secured is similar to the form for recording the raw responses. When educators were asked to report perceptions of student status in reading and comprehension of material, they were asked to respond to the three questions:
 - a. What proportion of your students read and comprehend most assignments with no difficulty?
 - The range of responses was extremely wide, from none to all.
 - The mean proportion perceived as experiencing no difficulty was .36 in Europe and .37 in U.S.A.
 - Although the range was extensive most responses clustered between .05 and .30 with about 60% of all responses at these levels.
 - b. What proportion experience some difficulty?
 - The mean proportion perceived as having some difficulty, but able to cope, was .48 among Euro-

PERCEPTIONS OF READING COMPETENCIES IN CONTENT AREAS HELD BY EDUCATORS IN EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN SCHOOLS

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Criticisms regarding reading limitations among American students, with a companion implication that European schools produce more successful readers, sparked the desire to look at schools in other countries. Educators should seek to find the kind of programs that lead toward maximum success. A review of publications about European schools, especially those related to reading in content areas, uncovered a 1979 survey of schools in England by Her Majesty's Inspectors which noted that

pean educators and .47 among Americans.

— Responses here clustered between .40 and .70.

c. What proportion encounter extreme difficulty?

— The range here went from none to half of the class.

— The mean proportion of those perceived as having severe limitations in reading was .16 for both European and American settings — specifically .16426829 for Europe and .16358695 for the U.S.A.

— Majority of responses clustered between .05 — .20.

Teachers and administration at all levels interviewed expressed a genuine concern regarding students encountering "extreme" difficulty as well as those experiencing "some" difficulty.

II. Practices in schools for improving reading and comprehension reported most frequently included:

- a. scheduling students into specific class sections
- b. reduction in the amount of reading required in courses
- c. employment of teachers to help students, most often providing instruction in study strategies
- d. introduction of new, specialized vocabulary by content teachers; and less often
- e. adapting assignments and required reading demands in terms of recognized competencies or limitations in reading with the goal of fostering learning growth.

III. Recommendations

The suggestions made by those interviewed for improving the reading situation included:

- a. more effective reading instruction prior to entry into the advanced educational levels
- b. more stringent criteria for entry into the secondary school — This recommendation was heard from those teaching in the highly selective European gymnasium as well as those involved in technical-vocational programs in the U.S. and
- c. employment of personnel specifically trained to assist learners with limitations in reading or study strategies, or skill in mathematics.

A few voices suggested that teachers might carefully examine ways of helping mature learners read better and thereby learn more effectively.

Teachers of content areas indicate that they do not feel prepared to help students in strengthening their reading skills. Direct assistance needs to be provided in this area so that the development of competency in reading can be moved into the learning of social studies, math, science and other content areas. As learners progress in school the demands of subject matter impose the necessity of applying those reading and study skills already mastered. There is also a need to sharpen reading skills not previously used and for learning new techniques. The specialized reading materials used in advanced subjects demand growing competencies in reading and comprehending.

Carefully designed teaching objectives are needed to guide students toward increase fluency, flexibility and accuracy as well as skill in critical and creative reading. Achieving this goal will require fusing learning experiences which can strengthen reading with those aimed at increasing knowledge of the content being studied.

Looking specifically at the similarity in findings of this study when comparing perceptions of reading by European and American educators, there may be need to promote awareness of this evidence. The public and the press should be realistic in recognizing how reading is viewed. Seeking ways to improve can emerge from assessing limitations and needs in reading, but misdirected criticism could interfere with effective utilization of data on perceptions. It appears that accurate perceptions held by reading personnel and by teachers of content areas at all levels provide the greatest promise for fostering continuous development in those reading and study skills needed for success in the various subjects they are pursuing as well as in application to the needs of living in the world as citizens of today and tomorrow.

The evidence strongly suggests a similarity of perceptions among educators (teachers and administrators) in 15 European countries and in the selected American schools. Proportions of students perceived as reading with ease, those who need to work diligently, and those who encounter extreme difficulty are essentially the same. Shall this be viewed as an important finding and evidence that perceptions held by faculty in elitist schools do not differ significantly from those in schools which educate a much larger proportion of the population?

Standard and widely-accepted views can become traditional and be presented as expected norms. Should the role of education today be the maintenance of traditional viewpoints and perceptions, especially those that seem to be rather universally accepted? Or should education look for a new vision, a new perception, a new reality for the future? In looking at "Reading for Adults" and exploring "Avenues for Growth," are there some folklore, views, or myths that need to be avoided? Can educators maintain the strengths of tradition while gaining a vision of new realities?

What new perceptions would one like to see replacing some of the folklore that seems to have been accepted?

1. One proverbial piece of folklore taken from popular economics declares that "The Poor are always with you." Translated to education this suggests the "Poor students are always found in classes." And the research findings suggest that many teachers believe this, even when their school population has been carefully selected to screen out those poor students!

Do some students show limitations in learning because teachers have not sought ways to capture their interests, promote their personal concerns, and utilize learning avenues that can result in success?

Can a new perception capture the concept that some poor learners are "denied learners," individuals that have been denied opportunities to use their own competencies, their own language patterns, their own potential to achieve goals that would hold meaning and values for them? Can learners with limitations be seen as a source for creativity — for teaching so effectively that they will learn some of the things teachers want them to learn as well as much of personal or potential value to them?

2. A second area of concern would be related to equal opportunity within a pluralistic society. The traditional educational claim asserts that every individual had the

same opportunity to learn — and some did, while others did not. The same perception might hold that a welcoming community is characterized by the invitation “join us” and “do it our way.”

Can this myth be replaced with a plan of cooperation, a mutuality in effort which recognizes that equality in opportunity takes into account factors such as background of information, learning style or modality preference, perhaps hemispheric dominance and other elements in order to provide a truly equalitarian setting? There may be a need to formulate provisional classroom procedures and climate allowing those who believe and respond in different ways to join together.

3. A third focus of folklore has been Technology. The old view has been that technical knowledge and development will solve all problems. But a new, and more realistic, perception should recognize that for every positive advance in technology there may be accompanying limitations. Current interest and concern in computers sometimes take on overtones of a panacea . . . But regularly it is possible to hear teachers who say, “I have one, and it doesn’t work!” Admittedly, this can involve either the technology or the ability of the user to apply or utilize it effectively to achieve desired purposes. Certainly, a realistic view of technology, as well as other educational practices, would recognize that strengths hold companion limitations with which one must deal.
4. Relationships carry an untold number of folk legends involving the position and authority of the teacher. Much seems to be based on the “might makes right” concept of ancient vintage.

Can a concept evolve of teachers as nurturers, as caretakers who relate to students as persons? Can schools plan ways to strengthen self-concept of learners? Can educators, as enablers, provide impetus for action by those who think carefully and plan appropriate activities?

Data have been reviewed on the teacher perceptions of reading competencies manifested by secondary students in various subject areas. Also reviewed were some of the traditional perceptions held in educational folklore related to four areas:

1. Range of student competencies
2. Equality of opportunity
3. Technological advances
4. Teacher-learner relationships

In conjunction with the traditional views, ways have been suggested in which distortions can be modified and positive elements amplified to effect renewal and more positive results that may promote nurturance and cognitive caring.

It is believed that through exploration, through sharing insights and information gained, through study, through writing and reading and interacting it is possible to evolve new insights, introduce new dimensions and open new avenues of growth toward a liberating literacy for adults and, indeed, for all learners.