

SECONDARY READING PROGRAMS: RATIONALE AND
CRITERIA FOR PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

By Terry Teich

Reading instruction used to be considered a job exclusively for the elementary schools under the theory that "the student in elementary school learned to read, and the student in secondary school read to learn." (3:33) This premise assumed that once a pupil had been taught the basics, becoming a skilled reader was a matter of practice with no need for further instruction as each student was prepared to handle new materials. (3:33; 9:1) However, upon evaluation of the secondary student's reading status, professional educators have begun to realize the need for a secondary reading program and support the incorporation of reading programs into the secondary curriculum.

The Secondary Student and Reading

A growing number of secondary students have left the public school systems unable to function effectively because of reading deficiencies. Statistics from the United States Office of Education have revealed that one in four students has significant reading deficiencies; half of the unemployed youths from ages sixteen to twenty-four are functionally illiterate, and three-fourths of the juvenile offenders in New York City were two or more years retarded in reading. (12:2) In fact, many students entering the secondary school level have not even mastered essential reading skills. (5:366)

Plausible reasons, selected from various studies, as to why secondary students have not even mastered basic reading skills include the following (1:107-8; 4:128-29; 11:19; 15:249):

1. Failure of secondary educators to recognize that reading is a developmental process that does not cease after grade six.
2. Rejection by content area teachers of the notion that every teacher is a teacher of reading.
3. The decision to leave the development of reading skills to reading teachers alone.

4. Adherence to the idea that remediation should be the emphasis in secondary reading programs.

5. Lack of administrative support.

6. Absence of qualified teachers to fill specialized teacher positions and assume the responsibility for promoting reading programs.

7. Acceptance of promotion policies which pass a student on from grade to grade because of minimal standards of performance and low teacher expectations.

8. Failure of schools to involve the community in reading programs.

9. Unawareness that secondary students might profit from direct help.

The Need for Secondary Reading Programs

A secondary reading program is needed as an integral part of secondary instruction. This need is supported for a variety of reasons by different sources.

1. Reading is a developmental process that requires continued instruction and practice so each student can reach his/her full potential. Elementary children are too immature to acquire some of the advanced skills which logically would be introduced at the secondary level. Reading programs need to be extended at the secondary level to promote the growth of skills for all students and to avoid the disabilities that may occur if minor omissions are allowed to accumulate in instructional programs. (2:41; 8:17; 10:3)

2. Since reading is basically a process and not a subject, isolation from the entire curriculum should not occur. Content area teachers, though not reading teachers, can become more aware of the reading process as reading and study skills are integrated into the various content areas. Content area teachers need only teach those reading skills necessary for understanding and exploring their content. In addition, content area teachers can assist students in varying their reading rate and in reading materials for different reasons. (1:108; 8:16-17; 10:3; 12:17)

3. The readability of secondary textbooks presents more support for continuing a reading program. As textbooks are generally written at or above grade level, reading then becomes more difficult at the secondary level. The student must continue to develop his/her ability to read more difficult material in order to cope with this situation. (10:3)

4. Each type of student has the right to receive instruction which will help him/her overcome any obstacle and/or develop his/her reading ability to its fullest potential. The needs of each student--whether a retarded reader, slow learner, average student, or gifted--must be considered in the secondary schools. (10:3; 12:3-4)

5. School success can be directly linked to reading achievement, according to research and experiences of both administrators and teachers. As a child progresses in school, reading has proven to be both a tool and a multi-faceted process through which learning takes place as approximately seventy-five percent of learning occurs from books. (11:20; 12:9; 15:249)

6. Since the law has established a minimum age for attendance in school, every student continues on into the secondary level. Since a growing number of employers today demand that employees have a high school diploma as a minimal educational requirement, that diploma should signify that the student has the ability to handle the reading tasks needed to survive on the job. Schools also need to encourage reading so students can function in a literate manner by using reading for recreation, self-education, and productive citizenship. (2:42; 10:4)

Support for Secondary Reading Programs

Gradually, authorities have come to the realization that reading should be taught throughout a student's entire educational experience as reading is a continuous process and a basic, vital tool needed to facilitate learning during school and throughout life. (7; 13:33; 14:6)

William S. Gray, in a speech delivered at Cornell

University, Ithaca, New York, indicated that reading growth does extend beyond the elementary level:

Records of pupil progress show conclusively that even in the simpler aspects of reading--such as word recognition, meaning, vocabulary, and comprehension--growth continues throughout the high school years and even into college and life. Of greater importance is the fact that the more mature phases of reading--such as depth of interpretation, critical reaction to what is read, and the ability to read technical materials--develop most rapidly at the high school and college levels. To promote the rapid development of the more mature aspects of reading is one of the special responsibilities of high school teachers.

These implications indicate that the road to better reading involves a sequential program which begins in the kindergarten and extends through the grades and high school and which is carefully coordinated to insure continuous and steady growth in reading ability throughout these vital years. (14:6)

In the elementary setting, all the reading skills a student needs in high school can not be developed or mastered. Therefore, a program in secondary reading is needed to extend the skills which are introduced at the elementary level and to develop those skills which are demanded by the more complex materials and learning required at the secondary level. (6:14) Secondary reading programs strengthen a student's reading potential.

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The Clearing House (February, 1976), 248-49.

REVIEW: Books for You. Urbana, Illinois: National Council
of Teachers of English, 1982

The new edition of the NCTE publication includes an annotated bibliography of 1400 books. The editor notes that the committee chose these from 3500 titles examined. The books were selected on the basis of their being enjoyable to read rather than their being considered classics or necessary reading by all teenagers. Only books published or reprinted since 1976 are included. The bibliography is categorized according to 35 subject headings with some books located under several topics. Some of these categories include "Adventures and Adventurers," "Ethnic Experiences," "Hobbies and Crafts," "Music and Musicians," "Short Stories," and "Westerns and People of the West."

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