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Reasons for a High School Reading Programme

by Professor G. D. SPACHE

WE have extensive reading programmes of a wide variety of types in the U.S.A. and think them almost indispensable. Our basic reason for the evolution of these and their types is the belief that as long as a student continues in school, then new demands which arise make necessary continued instruction in reading. Some of us go so far as to say that the individual student needs help in order to learn to read more effectively and efficiently *as long as he continues in school or college, including graduate students.*

My own personal work is centred round helping college students to get the best out of college. They are selected to a rather high degree in terms of academic ability or intelligence. They represent a selection from the top forty per cent of the state in which they live. They are not the cream of the crop but are certainly a rather careful selection from among our high school graduates. But from among this group, who in every sense have completed secondary education quite satisfactorily, there are perhaps twenty-five or thirty per cent who will not complete college without some sort of help in how to work efficiently and study and read in college.

My clinic serves in the neighbourhood of 750 to 1,000 college students on an individual basis each year out of a total enrolment of something like 17,000. Most of these come in fact from the freshman class, which is exactly 3,000 in size. These are fairly common enrolment figures in American state universities. We feel that although the student has had basic education, basic training in reading, and that the skills of reading and comprehension, vocabulary and the like are probably well developed, the new demands in terms of quality and in terms of quantity at the beginning of the high school period and again at the beginning of the college period do make college very difficult. Our normal failure rate in these same state universities, for example, is quite high: four out of ten do not even finish the first year in college. Obviously this is not only because of specific reading problems: there are other difficulties, but reading plays a very large part. Yet they come, as I say, with a modicum of reading ability, reading as well perhaps as the average student. A student must not only be able to read at a reasonable rate, but he must be able to read at great variations of rate, some materials much faster than others, perhaps to vary his reading from the range of 100-200 words to 600-800 words a minute and to have the planning and foresight to know when to attempt to read materials at these varying rates. He must learn such techniques as pre-viewing before reading. We suggest that before he begins any assignment he look it over rather carefully, read the questions which are appended to the text and make pre-reading plans. He must learn how to skim, in other words to read at a very rapid rate, in some materials for main ideas and in other cases for minor details. He must know how to skim in the sense of finding a single fact or idea embedded somewhere in the text. In other words, numerous techniques of reading are essential and the average secondary student does not have these any more than the average adult does or the individual graduate; he is not so flexible; he does not know how to handle the materials in an effective, efficient manner.

In the area of vocabulary, he must learn to recognise the inferences in the author's facts as well as his mode of presenting them. He must learn to form judgements or to withhold them; he must learn to detect the device which writers use to manipulate his thinking. These are mature reading skills that the elementary school levels and secondary levels have not developed.

These attempts to provide reading training and reading improvement for our secondary and college students are over thirty years old. College counsellors were quick to recognize the problems of transition from the elementary to secondary and secondary to college levels and the need for training. To-day the majority of American high schools and colleges conduct programmes in reading and study skills. These may be separate training programmes or they may be combined. My own opinion is that it is difficult to separate study skills from the act of reading at this level. Training of both types has one major goal. Some are part of a required course — in many institutions the student must take this training; he has no choice. He may not get any credit towards graduation for it, but it is absolutely required and if he does well in it, he will get only one term of it. If he does not, he may be expected to do two or three terms and not be

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permitted to drop it until he has shown some sort of satisfactory progress. At other colleges it is optional. In my college, we give the students a reading test upon entrance to college — a higher level reading test. We discuss the results with them and point out, almost on an individual basis, their strengths and weaknesses, expose them to a speech by one or two impressive college professors about the importance of reading and then finally leave the decision to them as to whether they will do anything about it. By this time they are quite aware of their needs, if they were not before, and of the importance of reading, but actually whether they attend my clinic or not is a matter of personal choice. They get no credit for it, they pay no extra fee, in fact they devote three hours at least per week to self-improvement in this area.

Now the goals of these secondary programmes I would say are at least threefold: (1) To develop the foundation skills and to introduce new applications of these. (2) To correct any marked weakness in any major skill. (3) The third goal is to give special help with extreme difficulties and this would again be a continuation of the foundation schemes or a special attention to one major area. A great many of the programmes emphasize improvement in reading rate, for example, or improvement in vocabulary or comprehension. Consider these the three major components of the reading process, and if a student shows poor performance in one of these three, the entire course or the major part of it may be devoted to this one major area. For those who do not, there would be a general kind of training as implied in the first goal.

Like you, we have large numbers of students who are bilingual or trilingual. On my own campus the number of foreign-born entries is in the neighbourhood of five or six hundred students and they come from some twenty-seven or twenty-eight countries. Theoretically they speak English — only theoretically. They are screened before they leave their country, before they are awarded a scholarship or whatever arrangements are made, and theoretically they read and write in English, but we find that this very often is not the case at all, that they cannot manage any kind of textual material which we offer. This is only one of those types that may present extreme difficulties.

It is possible for the students perhaps to finish secondary school and still be extremely ineffectual readers in rate, vocabulary and comprehension, to be comparable to students of much lower age or grade placement, certainly to know nothing of the nature of the language in terms of its use in this medium. Yet they would have finished high school creditably and passed examinations and so on.

We did a study three years ago on the characteristics of poor readers who fail in college, and we got some of the logical answers you might expect. Some poor readers do succeed in finishing college if they have an area of strength and interest. The profile of their scores is not a flat profile, but there is one major area — perhaps maths or science — in which they have real interest and real strength and they just compensate for their general weakness in study skills by this interest and by the grades they achieve in these areas, since success is determined by an overall average of grades, so these students can in many instances succeed in college as well as the normal or better reading student can. The poor reader who does not succeed has in contrast no major areas of strength and weakness and thus no possibilities of compensating for this — in other words he cannot get his grades in maths or science to offset his grades in English and foreign languages. There were no other points of difference between these two groups of poor readers that we could find. The size of the school from which they came, the quality of instruction, the variety of the curricula in their secondary school, their age, their test scores upon entrance to college — all were very similar.

Gradually, this attempt to provide important services has spread to industry and now there are many American corporations which, in the course of their induction of members offer reading training improvement, particularly to the upper echelons of management. This is sometimes completely underwritten by the corporation, which supplies the teachers and the materials. At other times there are small fees to the employee for the reading courses, the feeling being that this is an excellent investment for the corporation in that the individual may be helped to handle business material much more rapidly and efficiently with such training, so the company actually profits from this. There are many of these firms who have made a careful analysis of the results of a reading improvement course for their members and point out that in monetary value it has great returns. Other corporations use the services of a local college or a local reading centre and invite those people who are reading specialists to come and offer their training; or they will send their employees to the college perhaps in compauy time and take such training. As a result, there are perhaps three or four hundred thousand adults who are taking

a course in reading improvement each eight or ten weeks in America.

Secondary schools in America were slow at first in following this trend; the colleges have done this; Dartmouth Institute, for example, a high level American private college founded to provide education for the American Indian, but now a very selective institution, has had a reading and study skills course for some thirty or thirty-five years. This was one of the first. Secondary schools did not follow suit even though they felt the implicit criticism. Part of the problem was the same kind of situation as with any new trend in education — there were not enough trained personnel, not enough reading specialists familiar with secondary reading problems; there were not training institutions that were preparing such people, in fact to-day there are perhaps no more than two or three dozen American universities who offer advanced reading training at the doctoral level.

As the numbers have spread at the secondary and college levels, there have been a great many research studies testing the values of this reading instruction at all the levels at which it is offered.

It is customary in America to require students in most of our states to remain at school until the age of 16 or 17; whether they are college or high school material or not is immaterial, the law says that they must remain in school. They can evade this to some degree in some cases by beginning work part-time and attending school part-time and the like, but there is no recognition in the law of the theory of individual differences and so we are concerned with the fact that a great many of our students attempt to leave school or wish to leave school or probably should leave school at an earlier time than we would hope for them. The reading improvement services have demonstrated that this can be avoided, that the number of students who fail academically and therefore wish to leave or try to leave in some fashion can be reduced. There is evidence that the individual's grades in school are usually improved as a result of such training — not perhaps immediately; the general indication is that during the semester or two in which the person takes the reading improvement training, his grades do not materially change, but in perhaps the third term after the training, there is definite evidence that the grades levels in general will be distinctly higher than they were prior to the reading training or during the period of reading training.

There is an economy in student time and effort, students are taught to make the best use of their time. This reminds me of one student of whom this was particularly true. The boy came to the reading clinic and asked for help. We enquired about his grades. He was a straight A student, which meant he got the highest possible grades in every subject he was taking. The person who was working with him said: "Well, what in the world do you suppose we could do for you? You are already getting the highest grades it is possible to get." The boy replied: "But to get those I study about 16 hours a day." We said: "Well, this we can do something about. It is not essential, it is not necessary for you to study for this great period of time to achieve such grades." And he stayed with us some five or six months studying such techniques as note-taking, outlining, summarizing, improving his planning and the economy of his time. He is now one of our best salesmen among the students, because he goes around saying: "Look what the reading clinic has done for me. I do my work now in half the time it used to take." Of course, everyone knew what an outstanding student he was and assumed that the reading clinic had accomplished this also, of which we did not disabuse them; we let them go on thinking so. Our greatest impact, I am sure, among our students is from one student to another. We do not in the usual American fashion carry on an advertising campaign to get the students to attend the reading clinic.

In industry it has been demonstrated that substantial savings in working time and money have been achieved by the increase in the efficiency of the individual. An American businessman must cover quite a volume of paper work, and often the reading training course is planned to deal with exactly the kinds of materials that he has to read each day, in fact these often become the training materials to keep his 'in' and 'out' baskets balanced as it were, so that he may learn to read more critically, more effectively and at greater variations of rate.

Because of the pressure of increasing enrolments at all our educational institutions, the growth of reading services of all types has been most prominent in the last ten years or so. American schools are under great pressure from the population explosion. Enrolments in colleges have increased materially over the last four or five years. Most of us expect to double or to treble our size in the next ten years. My own institution in 1948 had a total of about four thousand students. It was an all-male institution; it became eventually co-educational. To-day, it has between seventeen and eighteen thousand and our projection is that that same institution will go to twenty-five to thirty thousand

by 1970 and there is nothing in the world we can do to stop it or to change the trend. Also, in this particular state — Florida — there are a million families or so moving into the state each year, bringing something like four million children, but the same situation exists in most American secondary and collegiate institutions. Some of our secondary schools have grown to monstrous size. Some of our collegiate institutions now number forty or fifty thousand students — some have ten or twelve or thirteen separate campuses. Most of our secondary age pupils in the entire country are in school — in other words, there is little or no selection; everybody is there — our figure remains at over ninety per cent and obviously we have the full range of ability and of reading skills.

America has an almost impossible ideal — that everybody should have a college education. This is literally impossible in any of a dozen ways and yet we are working toward it all the time and trying to live with the problems we thus create. However, at the same time that these improvement services have, in a sense, been forced to grow because of need, there have been severe lacks in the professional side. There have not been professional organisations of trained individuals which might control the training and practices of reading teachers at any of these levels and there have been a number of unfortunate trends. At the moment, for example, under our new elementary/secondary Act, as it is called, our Federal Government is devoting billions of dollars to subsidize education. A great part of this is finding its way into the area of reading. Take again my state of Florida as an example. We had 22 million dollars given to us by the Federal Government almost to use as we wished, to improve education, particularly for those who were culturally disadvantaged. Each county school system was permitted to plan something. submit this to the State Department and draw its quota of money. Eighty per cent of the 57 counties submitted a plan for some sort of reading improvement. Eighty per cent of the plans dealt with reading training and services. Thus, overnight, we needed thousands of specially trained reading teachers at all levels for all kinds of reading services and we did not have them, so we are, as it were, creating them over-night by in-service training programmes.

At the same time as this tremendous effort to prepare teachers, we have found that there are a number of commercial firms who are jumping into the gap to provide us with panaceas that would solve all our problems. Dozens of reading training improvement devices have been offered to the public, many dreamed up on Friday and sold on Monday. Hundreds of persons have set themselves up as reading specialists to offer even to the general public courses in what are called "speeded reading" or "dynamic reading", and, believe it or not, they offer to teach you, as an adult, to read all of Shakespeare's works in an hour and a half or to read the Bible completely in an hour or so. All this for $175-00 per course, which consists of about fifteen hours of correspondence work. The public press, of course, has been responsible for some of this, and there have been hundreds of articles by non-professionals which has again fostered the illusion that the rate of reading can be at any rate one could care to name — 30,000 or 50,000 words a minute, and always accompanied by adequate comprehension.

We have not had a militant professional organization to curb this kind of thing; the organizations have not taken a stand. With all due respect, the I.R.A. has not had the courage to go to court and stop such obviously false advertising, sales of materials and devices. Yet we know that it is impossible for the reader to read at such speeds unless he skims or flips pages or something of this sort.

There was a time when reading improvement could be offered to a few pupils in each class. But as we began to get more classes, it became obvious that instead of working with a few students in each class or at each level of secondary school, we now had whole classes of poor readers or sections where the individuals were extremely retarded or suffering from some sort of retardation in reading.

A typical high school American reading programme usually begins with a group test of general reading which is intended to find out which students would benefit from help. Often an intelligence test is included in order to make a comparison between the reading performance and presumed potential; by various manipulations, the bottom quarters, let us say, of the students in the level are identified. If the number were sufficient, as it would be in some schools, whole groups would be formed. If the number were relatively small, then very often the reading improvement would be included as part of the English programme. Many schools have assumed that the teacher of English is the most logical person to turn to for reading improvement effort and have asked her to set aside a certain proportion of her instructional time for this effort. She knows no more about it than does any other content field teacher, but yet it seems logical that this is one way of doing it when the numbers involved are not very great. The structure of the course, the nature of it,

may be developmental — basic skills, further polishing and so on, or correction of a major skill or remedial reading. In some institutions, the whole programme may include all three types. There may be a clinic set up which is maintained as an open classroom to which students come whenever they are free instead of there simply being a teacher and a group of pupils who are being trained in reading or improvement of reading. They have perhaps a basic regular schedule to go there, but during each study hour or any free time, they are permitted to attend — this is what we call a laboratory approach. In a small school with a limited number of teachers this might be a feasible approach. The room is specially equipped, the teaching is highly flexible and the students come and work on a planned programme at those hours that they fit in to their schedule. This is another way of operating instead of thinking of it simply as another kind of classroom instruction. Both types are quite prominent. The training varies considerably from one place to another. Sometimes the emphasis is upon improving reading in the various content fields; in other words, we are as much concerned with teaching the student to read arithmetic as we are about literature, in fact most of us in the field of reading think that the emphasis upon literature as the only major reading area is unfortunate, that the skills, the types of thinking, the whole process as it operates in literature is a distinctly different thing. Reading arithmetic problems, scientific material, natural science, physical science or any other major area requires a different approach, different goals, different page-by-page techniques of the student. One may read well in literature and fulfil all the aims of the instructor in this area, but read abominably in science or any other given area. There is no such thing as a general reading skill, so in many of our courses, there is equal emphasis upon reading in various content fields rather than a kind of global training in reading.

Morris's book "Success and Failure in Learning to Read" points out some of the differences between the British conception of what reading is supposed to do for the individual and the American. We are over-concerned with test results, it is true. We have mechanized our education as much as is humanly possible. We even assign students to classes by a computer. But still in the area of reading, I think we are still concerned first of all that we make a reader, if it is at all possible, out of the individual.

Another goal is to improve his tastes by introducing him perhaps to better quality material than he would normally read. Of course we ignore the fact that he reverts to his normal types as soon as he leaves us, but it is an interesting goal all the same.

Thirdly, we try to create interest in self-improvement: we try to clarify to the student what his weaknesses are and tell him that we cannot superimpose skill, we cannot teach him to read better, we can only help him understand why he doesn't and what he needs to improve in order to read better. This may represent perhaps a more personal than general preference, but we do not teach him to read better, we simply point out and help him to understand the ways in which he is ineffective. So we do attempt to involve the student actively in this process of self-improvement, to have him understand clearly his difficulties.

Fourthly, we try to introduce students to a wide variety of material. In this we are very fortunate. Our publishers run their presses twenty-four hours a day literally and they are pouring out materials at a very great rate. At the lower levels, we have a tremendous volume and variety of materials to which we can subject the child at any rate in the hopes of developing interests and tastes.

A class will meet, let us say, two or three times a week for an hour at a time and this will continue perhaps for something like thirteen to fifteen weeks. This is the general framework; about fifty to seventy per cent of the students will show marked improvement as measured by increases in speed of reading on a test, or better comprehension or vocabulary. The courses vary, of course, in their emphasis. Some are exclusively for improvement of rate of reading and comprehension; others emphasize vocabulary-building; others still would be more general but in most cases, the general statistics show that about seventy per cent of these students will have shown distinct improvement in reading. Not all of this is permanent gain. Most of our follow-up studies show that about fifty per cent is permanent, the other fifty per cent is due to the temporary effect of the training. The corrective and remedial cases show the most improvement and normally the students will be helped to continue secondary school to achieve better grades, will be prevented from leaving school or, in other words, will be helped to accomplish the normal class academic goal in academic graduation.