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POOR READERS DON'T GET TO READ MUCH

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the amount of actual reading of connected text, orally or silently, assigned during classroom reading instruction. The numbers of words read by children in good and poor reading groups were compared to identify whether the amount of actual reading varies even when the allocated reading instructional time remains relatively similar between groups. Reading groups were observed during reading instruction in 24 first- and second-grade classrooms. The author found that good readers read, on the average, more than twice as many words per session than poor readers did. Also, the poor readers received different instruction from the good readers; they were seldom asked to read silently, and their oral-reading errors were often treated out of context. Poor readers don't read as much as good readers in school, and they have few opportunities to practice silent reading. Since students must read to improve their reading abilities, this deficit may be a contributing factor to the underachievement of poor readers. Poor readers will need to read larger quantities of material if they are ever to become better readers.

Poor Readers Don't Get to Read Much

Richard L. Allington¹

The question, "How best do we teach poor readers?" has long been a major issue of contention in the professional literature. Unfortunately, educators are perhaps no closer to resolution today than they were a half-century ago. Until recently, the debate centered almost exclusively around which strategies, materials, and techniques were most appropriately used with under-achieving readers. In the last decade, there have been four dimensions added: an interest in amount of time allocated to instruction (Alpert, 1975), in teacher-learner verbal interactions (Gumperz & Hernandez-Chavez, 1972; McDermott, 1977), in instructions given to students by teachers (Allington, in press; Weinstein, 1976), and in how time is spent in compensatory instruction (Howlett & Weintraub, 1979; Quirk, Trismen, Nalin & Weinberg, 1975). In general, these studies show that the reading instruction given to poor readers is different from that given to good readers.

Rist (1970), for instance, found evidence of preferential treatment of high-ability students in one kindergarten classroom and concluded that the students perceived as having low ability would probably perform to these expectations since they were allocated the least amount of instructional time. Brophy and Good (1970) found that high-ability students received preferential treatment and were granted more autonomy than low-ability students. McDermott (1977), in another study of a single classroom,

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found poor readers spent less time reading than good readers and that there were differential interaction patterns between the teachers and the different groups -- differences that seemed to favor the good readers. Good and Brophy (1972) suggest that low-achievement students typically receive less opportunities to respond than high-achievement students. Archer (1977) argues that poor readers are less likely to be praised and less likely to be dealt with sympathetically than good readers. (Gumperz & Hernandez-Chavez (1972) noted that good readers were corrected less for their errors than poor readers were, and the poor readers' errors were dealt with more immediately. Duffy (Note 1) presents evidence that the content of instruction differs between good and poor readers in some classrooms.

Weinstein (1976) found a few interactional differences between the teacher and students from different ability groups during whole class instruction, but noted that the teachers acted and reacted differently towards these same students when dealing with them in their reading groups. However, she reports that in reading groups, the good readers typically received fewer evaluative comments and were criticized more, while the poor readers were more likely to be praised after correct responses and after oral reading performance. Allington (in press), on the other hand, reports poor readers were more likely to be interrupted following an error and more often had their attention directed to graphic and phonic characteristics of the misread word. Good readers were interrupted far less often and when the teacher interrupted, the reader was directed to attend to syntactic or semantic information.

Much of what seems to be basic disagreements in the data presented above can be accounted for by noting that the various investigators looked at, and for, different kinds of behaviors in different types of settings with different instruments. Whether differences exist in the instruction

provided good and poor readers depends, then, on which aspects of the instructional environment are studied and whether one wishes to study a single reading lesson, compare two or more instructional groups, or observe reading instruction in general in a large sample of classrooms.

Several other researchers (Allington, 1977; Quirk et al., 1975) did not directly compare instruction given to good and poor readers, but presented data on current practices in compensatory reading programs which strongly suggested that instructional differences do exist. In these studies, poor readers are portrayed as receiving little silent reading instruction or practice (Quirk et al, 1975) and as doing little actual reading relative to the good readers, either orally or silently (Allington, 1977).

Amount of time allocated for reading instruction is undoubtedly a critical variable in ultimate achievement, but at the same time it can be argued that the amount of actual reading accomplished is also crucial. That is, doing contextual reading, as opposed to doing other reading instructional activities, seems to be the only way the learner can integrate the component processes and create self-monitored reading behaviors.

The purpose of the study reported here was to examine the amount of actual reading of connected text, orally or silently, assigned during classroom reading instruction. The numbers of words read by children in good and poor reader groups were compared to identify whether the amount of actual reading varies even when the allocated reading instructional time remains relatively similar between groups.

The Study

Twenty-four first- and second-grade teachers from four school districts volunteered to serve as subjects for this study. The teachers had no direct knowledge of the experimental questions but had been told that the author was interested in observing classroom reading groups.

The author or research assistants visited each classroom to see how much reading instruction the students in the good and poor reader groups received. All teacher participants were asked to simply teach reading as they normally would. Observers either noted the pages read (orally or silently) or audiotape recorded the entire reading instructional session. The number of words read by students during the reading group sessions was computed.

An analysis of variance was computed on the mean number of words read by the students in the two reading groups. Statistically, significant differences ($p < .01$) were evident; good readers read, on the average, more than twice as many words per session as poor readers. These differences are depicted in Table 1.

Table 1

Differences in Number of Words Read in Connected
Text as a Function of Reading Group Placement

	Words Read		
	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>	<u>Range</u>
Good reader groups	539	309	141-1306
Poor reader groups	237	136	48-686

Other results were noted that showed poor readers were receiving different instruction from the good readers. First, poor readers were seldom asked to read silently, either individually or as a group. Second, as also noted by Gumperz and Hernandez-Chavez (1972), the poor

readers' errors were often treated out of context, with the teacher emphasizing visual or phonic characteristics of the target word. In contrast, the good readers' errors were more often analyzed in the context in which they occurred, with the teachers commenting on the syntactic or semantic appropriateness of the errant response.

Conclusions

It seems obvious that poor readers do not read as much as good readers in school, and they have few opportunities to practice silent reading. Since students must read to improve their reading abilities, this deficit may, in fact, be a contributing factor to the underachievement of poor readers. While no data were collected on outside-of-reading group reading behaviors, it seems unlikely that the poor readers made up the differences through additional independent reading.

Poor readers seem to be allocated approximately the same amount of time for reading instruction as good readers (Alpert, 1975; Brophy & Good, 1970; Brophy & Evertson, 1976), though some contrary evidence does exist (McDermott, 1977; Rist, 1970). However, less reading is actually accomplished by poor readers than good ones. Several factors noted above seem to be related to the inequity in amount of reading completed.

In addition, the pervasive use of oral reading with poor readers undoubtedly contributes to the lesser number of words read. Oral reading is generally slower than silent reading, even in the primary grades. Also, when a student is reading orally, the teacher, and often the other children, interrupt him/her when errors occur. These interruptions seem to take anywhere from a second to several seconds but, perhaps more importantly, the interruptions seem to disrupt the continuity of the oral performance. Niles, Graham, and Winstead (1977) and Pehrsson (1974) have noted that when

readers are interrupted they tend to read fewer words and make a greater quantity of errors, errors qualitatively worse than when not interrupted. Brophy and Evertson (1976) have noted that successful teachers tend to keep interruptions to a minimum and attempt to move the reader quickly through the difficulty encountered.

Poor readers will need to read larger quantities of material if they are ever to become better readers. Continuing to offer poor readers half the opportunities for reading that good readers receive would seem to ensure a continuation of the status quo. While teachers may not be able to double the amount of time allocated for reading instruction for poor readers, there are several other possibilities that should be considered.

First, the amount of silent reading instruction and experience for the poor reader groups could be increased. This would ultimately increase the amount of material read since all members of the group would be reading simultaneously, rather than one child reading and the others listening and following along. Also, with practice, students' silent reading rate will exceed their oral reading rate, allowing them to read greater amounts of material. Finally, interruptions in the flow of reading will decrease since the other readers will be attending to their own reading and the teacher will be developing probes to assess both word identification and comprehension.

A second adaptation to be considered is the assignment of independent reading to poor readers. This reading may be from supplementary series, reading kits, trade books, or whatever. Too often teachers argue that their poor readers cannot read independently, but then confess to never having attempted to develop such abilities in these children. If an aide is available, the teacher should consider having him or her listen to retellings of material read independently by poor readers.

Finally, the teacher can use techniques such as sustained silent reading, echoic reading, read-along, or rereading to provide poor readers with the opportunity to develop and refine reading abilities through practice.

It is important that poor readers be given the opportunity to increase their reading experiences. How one chooses to accomplish this is of less concern. Giving poor readers additional experiences in reading will not necessarily turn them into good readers but it is a necessary first step in that direction. While the comment by Rist (1970) that low-achieving learners do not learn because they are not taught is perhaps too strong, it does seem reasonable to suggest that poor readers will not learn what they are not taught, and will never equal the learning rate of the better readers if they proceed at half the pace.

Reference Notes

1. Duffy, G. Teachers conceptions of reading project: A working paper (or more than you have ever wanted to know). East Lansing, Michigan: Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University, 1978.
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