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Practical Problems of Schoolbook Selection for Disadvantaged Pupils.

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Every year the purchase of unsuitable books for disadvantaged children wastes millions of dollars. The use of these unsuitable books results in extensive reading failure. In order to overcome this waste of money and human resources, book committees need to employ standards and methods of evaluation to identify books appropriate for disadvantaged children. An example of this technique is developed through an illustrative textbook evaluation based on interest appeal of the illustrations, readability of the content, and usefulness of the glossary. These three areas were chosen because they evaluate very different aspects of a book and are especially important in teaching disadvantaged children to read. References are listed. (BS)

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Practical Problems of Schoolbook Selection

For Disadvantaged Pupils

Thursday, April 25, 1:30-2:30 p.m.

4B Helping the Disadvantaged Learner

Reading and the Disadvantaged Child

RE 001 424

Today one of the great challenges to teachers and school officials is to provide disadvantaged pupils with suitable reading materials. It is a well-known fact that many disadvantaged pupils are struggling with texts they cannot read. They find the language unintelligible because it is so unlike that which they speak.

The money wasted annually in purchasing unsuitable schoolbooks runs into millions of dollars. But a much greater waste is that of human resources. Many disadvantaged children unable to read their schoolbooks fail and drop out from school. Adults who have not learned to read

are unable to inform themselves of their duties and rights as citizens; they cannot attain employment in keeping with their native capacities; nor can they keep up with advancing knowledge.

Children's needs. To correct this situation, committees having the responsibility of selecting textbooks must solve several important problems. The objective of all schoolbook selection is to find out which books satisfy the needs of the pupils. So the first problem of selection is: What kinds of facts reveal best the type of reading materials needed?

Research (3: 171 ff)* indicates that such facts as these are helpful: (1) age of the pupils; (2) level of maturity, both intellectual and emotional; (3) interests and motivation; (4) experiential background; (5) culture from which the pupils come; (6) status in reading; (7) oral language development; and (8) difficulties experienced earlier in learning to read. Without such knowledge of the pupils, there is no valid basis for the examination and comparison of books.

Standards of evaluation. A second problem is: What standards should be used in evaluating school books? In other words, what qualities or characteristics describe the merits and limitations of the books in light of the students' needs? Let us illustrate by reference to basic readers. Many disadvantaged pupils show no interest in, or motivation for, reading; so one important standard is interesting and attractive illustrations that will entice the pupils to read. Many disadvantaged pupils are seriously retarded in reading ability;

*Numbers in parentheses refer to the references at the end of this paper.

so another standard deserving much emphasis is ease of comprehension or readability. If the pupils are ready to begin dictionary work, still another standard relates to the usefulness of the glossary in the readers.

Methods of evaluation. When all the essential standards have been defined and agreed upon, the selecting committee faces the difficult problem of determining the methods to be used in evaluating the sample books. Observation shows that current methods of evaluation vary from the briefest consideration of books to very elaborate analyses, from questionable to sound practices, and from altogether subjective to scientific technique (5: 26-116). Unfortunately, few of the methods in use are designed to obtain objective data. As a result, books that merely look promising are often selected. Then the teacher who must use a book unsuited to his pupils finds it difficult to turn learning into an exciting and successful experience.

To illustrate the use of objective technique, let us assume that a committee is responsible for choosing a basic reader. The members have recognized that the value of a book depends on many qualities and that the book may be superior in one respect and yet so deficient in others as to be of little value. So rather than attempting to appraise each reader as a whole, the committee members have set up definite standards of evaluation. Among these are the three mentioned earlier--interest appeal of the illustrations, readability of the content and usefulness of the glossary. I chose these three because they deal with quite different aspects of a book. But it should not be inferred that facts about these few items would constitute a sufficiently comprehensive examination.

Illustrations. What objective methods can be applied to all the books alike to obtain reliable facts as to their relative merits? Let us consider this question, first, as it concerns interest appeal of illustrations.

Research (4) has shown the kinds of illustrations children like best. This should enable those who select books to increase the validity of their judgments. We know these facts concerning illustrations:

1. Illustrations may exert a negative as well as a positive appeal.
2. The larger the total number of illustrations in the book, the higher the interest value. This holds true up to an undefined point of saturation, at which a textbook becomes a mere picture book.
3. The larger the average size of the illustrations the higher the interest value, other things being equal.
4. An illustration in several colors has greater merit than one that is black-and-white. The artificial use of a single color other than black is less appealing than the realistic use of several colors.
5. An illustration with a center of interest that draws the eye to a particular point offers greater appeal to children than a picture with no recognizable center of interest or one subordinated by too many details.
6. The more action and the more interesting the action, the more appealing is the illustration.
7. The subject matter of the illustration has a marked effect upon its interest to children. Eventful topics

depicted in the illustration have greater merit than still-life topics.

By applying these standards to all or an adequate sampling of the pictures, each book under consideration can be given a rank as to the interest appeal of its illustrative material. Without such definite appraisal of the illustrations, the purchasers of books may unknowingly choose a book which handicaps even the best teachers in developing interest in reading by visual means.

Reisman (3: 326-332) has stressed that disadvantaged pupils learn best through concrete, active approaches such as role-playing and dramatic representation. A reader with illustrations ranking high according to the foregoing standards can be a distinct aid in suggesting the action and conversation in role-playing.

But disadvantaged children also need illustrations depicting characters with whom they can identify. In other words, the color bars must be broken. The pictures should show non-white people in as favorable a light as white people. So each illustration or a sampling should be inspected to see the extent and character of the integration, and tabulations of the results should be made. For example, is there any built-in discrimination such as depicting Negroes as bystanders, naming white characters only, putting the stories of Negroes at the back of the book, presenting Negroes in menial positions, and not depicting the professional Negro and others of high status?

Ease of comprehension. The second standard is readability. Unfortunately many children have to struggle to understand what they

read in their textbooks, not because they lack the basic reading skills but simply because the language is too difficult. Add to this for children of minority ethnic groups retardation in the use of standard English and it is obvious that they face impossible reading tasks. As they progress through school, they fall farther and farther behind. Not only do they average one or two years overage for their grade, but they are also retarded in reading an additional one or two years. When such pupils are given the typical textbook for the grade, is it any wonder that frustration sets in?

This situation can be overcome only if book selection committees predict reading difficulty as objectively and accurately as possible and consider the implications of the findings for the particular children.

During the past forty years, various investigators have been experimenting with the development of statistical formulas to measure reading difficulty. Beginning with the Winnetka formula, devised by Vogel and Washburne, at least six such formulas have been constructed. The use of the typical formula involves the systematic sampling of running words and analysis of the data to discover frequency, complexity and sentence length. Publishers have used the formulas in adjusting the difficulty of schoolbook manuscripts, and school officials have used them occasionally, but only to estimate the reading difficulty of new books.

It is now known that the statistical formulas may be more misleading than helpful. When several different formulas are applied to the same book, the ratings secured may vary a grade or more. Recently

Bormuth (1: 82) reported that the validity correlations of the formulas range from .5 to only .7. So after using a formula, a committee may think that a text scores high in readability when it actually does not.

At least two important advances have been made recently in the development of precise readability formulas. First, Bormuth (1) has derived a large number of entirely new linguistic variables which have a high correlation (.934) with passage difficulty. Second, he has shown that readability formulas can predict difficulty as well for pupils at one grade level as for those at the other levels. Thus while we cannot recommend readability formulas at present, doubtless in the future they will be greatly improved.

Also, by reading in the area of readability, a committee member can become much more sensitive to the difficulties of words, clauses and sentences.

Until valid formulas are available, book selection committees may test the difficulty of the book in the hands of the pupil rather than depend on mere consensus of opinion. However, there is need for controlled procedures. A valid trial is dependent upon observance of the principles of experimental technique. As far as possible, factors other than reading difficulty should be controlled so that they will not affect the results. For example, identical procedure should be followed in making comparative trials of different titles. The number of pupils participating should be large enough to insure statistical reliability of the data. The directions for the test should be clearly defined.

One type of test that can be objectified is that of using a sampling of passages from each book as oral-reading tests. This technique reveals the mechanical difficulties of the language used. It involves giving a standardized oral-reading test to the pupils, systematically sampling passages from the different books, using them as oral-reading tests, and comparing the children's scores in accuracy on the tests with those on the unstandardized passages.

In such a test ten Detroit teachers cooperated in appraising six fourth-grade readers. Participants were an equal number of boys and girls who made average fourth-grade scores on the Gray Oral Check Tests. Permission was obtained from the publishers to use mimeographed copies of the sample passages in order to rule out the influence of such factors as illustrations and differences in type face.

The results obtained were surprising. Of the six readers, only one approximated fourth-grade reading level. Even in that reader, certain stories were much harder than others. The five other readers varied widely in difficulty as shown by the number of errors made in reading them.

Similarly, a sufficient sampling of passages might be used as silent-reading tests and the cloze technique used to test comprehension. According to Bormuth (1: 82-83) a "cloze test is made over a passage by replacing every fifth word with an underlined blank of a standard length. Subjects are told to write in the words they think were deleted and responses are scored correct when they exactly match the words deleted." Scoring synonyms has not been found to increase the validity of the scores.

Hafner's discussion of readability problems (2) includes ideas that can be used as standards in inspecting books page by page. Examples of the standards are short sentences, few long words, use of nouns and verbs as opposed to adjectives and adverbs, and style that is concrete rather than abstract.

Glossaries. Let us turn now to a third important standard, the usefulness of glossaries in children's basic readers. Recently there has been a trend toward earlier teaching of the use of the dictionary. Preparatory glossaries have been appearing in readers as low as the third grade and picture dictionaries even earlier.

A glossary in a third reader can be a very useful aid in developing dictionary readiness. It can afford practice in noting alphabetical position and sequence and in obtaining the meanings of new words.

Inspection of the glossaries in four third-grade readers shows that they include: pronunciation keys similar to those in beginning dictionaries; illustrations, either colored or black-and-white; descriptions below the illustrations, consisting of a word, a phrase, a sentence, or a paragraph; definitions that give one or more than one meaning of the word; and sometimes sentences to show how the word is used.

But a book selecting committee must probe deeper to discover the real value of a glossary for disadvantaged pupils. Will the pupil be able to read and understand the definitions given? Do the definitions show vocabulary control? If vocabulary control is desirable in a reader, it is especially desirable since by definition a glossary is intended to clarify word meanings.

A little detective work can indicate the readability of a primary-grade glossary. All the examiner has to do is to take a sampling of the entry words, locate the page on which each word is introduced in the reader, and check to see whether all the words used in defining it were previously introduced in the readers.

The four glossaries that I examined showed no vocabulary control. Definitions of the entries not only included words that had not been taught but also used words that seemed harder to understand than the word being defined. For example, the word language was defined as human speech, business as a commercial enterprise and diesel as an engine that burns oil with heat caused by the compression or a condensing of air. The introductions to the pronunciation keys also lacked vocabulary control. A pupil could use the key successfully only if he had mastered many skills. Obviously in the books examined the portion devoted to the glossary is wasted when put in the hands of disadvantaged third-graders.

In conclusion, this paper has stressed three main points: that every year the purchase of unsuitable books for disadvantaged children wastes millions of dollars; (2) that the selection results in extensive reading failure; (3) that to overcome such waste of money and human resources book committees need to employ standards and methods of evaluation which will obtain facts about books and thereby aid in identifying appropriate books for disadvantaged children. Any sacrifice of time, effort and expense is justified to this end. For disadvantaged children will respond to instruction only when they are given superior schoolbooks -- superior in the sense of being far, far better adapted to their needs.

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