

The provision and use of resources for reading in a Cumbria junior school

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During the early part of 1979 I engaged in a thorough review of the resources available in my school (a large junior school in an industrial area) for the teaching and the development of reading skills. Concentrating on the use of skills beyond the reading scheme, I analysed the quality, content and use of the resources available to the children. These included resources designed to teach skills, as well as those in class and central libraries upon which these skills would be practised. The resources were analysed using a system of checklists, and the use being made of them was studied by the use of children's reading diaries and by general observation of children in the library.

Arising from this review I formulated several recommendations for improving both the provision and the use of resources in my school, and I detail these below in the hope that they may be of use to teachers in other establishments.

Reading across the curriculum.

Resources for skills acquisition do not, at present, cover a wide range of curriculum areas (see Table 1). It is, as Robinson (1975, pp 5-6) points out, unlikely that children will, by themselves, make the connection between skills learnt in one context and other contexts requiring exercise of those skills. Although this clearly becomes more crucial in the secondary school, it is still important for junior school children to learn that reading skills are necessary for the study of mathematics, history and so on, and are not only relevant to English work. One way of teaching this may be to give children skills activities (cloze passages, comprehension work, etc.) in a wide variety of curriculum areas.

Table 1

Resources for skill acquisition analysed by curriculum area

| | |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| English (including Literature) | 69% |
| Mathematics | 3% |
| History | 8% |
| Geography | 6% |
| Physical Science | 3% |
| Natural Science | 5% |
| Religious Education | 2% |
| Physical Education | 4% |

Resources for reading across the junior school age range.

There seems to be some imbalance at present in our stocks of fiction and especially non-fiction books (see Table 2). The situation here has improved markedly over the past few years but books suitable for the average reader of 7 or 8 years of age are still at a premium. The selection criteria that one would apply to books for older readers cannot fully be applied to books for this age group because at the moment one is simply pleased to find any suitable books. The greatest need seems to be for books which give a great deal of information but are written in easy language. At the moment the choice seems to be between books with the correct level of language but very little real information (like Macdonald Starters) and books with plenty of information written in language too difficult for a first or second year junior child to read with ease.

Table 2

*Books in the central library divided according to age level
(Fry's Readability Graph)*

| | | |
|-------------|--------------|------|
| Fiction | 7 - 9 years | 450 |
| | 9 - 11 years | 890 |
| Non-fiction | 7- 9 years | 370 |
| | 9-11 years | 1590 |

(figures to nearest ten)

Range of perspectives.

It would seem desirable to have more books that are written from an alternative perspective to the average. It was found (see Table 3) that there were very few books indeed written from perspectives other than that of the average middle-class white family. There were very few books with, as central characters, lower class children, and even fewer with black children (Zimet, 1976). *'The Devil's Children'* (Peter Dickinson, 1970) was the only book found in my school library which expressed sympathetically the viewpoint of a different racial group.

There are two main criteria here:

- (a) that the content of children's school books should reflect the reality of their lives;
 - (b) that the content of children's school books should provide a convenient and effective avenue for extending the boundaries of your pupils' immediate experiences.'
- (open University, 1977)

Children should be able to recognise themselves in the books they read, but they should also be shown sympathetic views of other groups of people. At the moment both existing stocks of books and potential new acquisitions satisfy neither of these criteria.

| <i>Table 3</i> | |
|---|------|
| <i>Fiction material in the central library analysed according to dominant perspective</i> | |
| Average, white, middle-class | 1150 |
| Alternative social | 150 |
| Alternative racial | 40 |
| <i>·(figures to nearest ten)</i> | |

Teacher knowledge of library books.

My findings indicate that teachers' awareness of the quality and content of books in our school is fairly low. I found that the vast majority of fiction books in our school library had not been read by any member of staff.

| <i>Table 4</i> | |
|--|---|
| <i>Number of fiction books in central library reported to have been read by members of staff</i> | |
| | <i>Mean number of books read by each person</i> |
| Lower Junior staff | 53 |
| Upper Junior staff | 41 |

It has been recommended that teachers need greater awareness of children's books. (HMI, 1971). One cannot recommend 'the right book, at the right time, for the right child' if one does not have a close knowledge of the books available, and this knowledge can only come from reading the books.

Reading formats.

The material provided in school for reading for information at the moment covers a limited range of formats. In adult life much of the information required is in formats other than books. All of these formats (magazines, newspapers, rules and regulations, instructions, information pamphlets, timetables etc.) have their own special reading demands and ideally the school reading curriculum should prepare for this. My survey would suggest that many formats were under-represented in the reading curriculum in my school at present.

Table 5

Resources for skill development (central library non-fiction material) analysed according to format

| | |
|-----------------------|------|
| Books | 1960 |
| Periodicals | 220 |
| Information Pamphlets | 0 |
| Rules and Regulations | 0 |
| Instructions | 0 |
| Timetables | 0 |
| Catalogues | 0 |
| Forms | 0 |

I would suggest that such formats as magazines, newspapers and information pamphlets could easily be obtained and would make valuable additions to the resources of the school.

The use of resources.

Careful consideration needs to be given to the use of resources by the children. There is a tendency for teachers to 'spoonfeed' the children by selecting their resources for them. For example, children involved in a particular project are often told which books will be useful to them and sometimes they are given these books by the teacher. This surely deprives the children of the practice necessary to develop their information-location skills. They need to be taught the skills to select and assess relevant sources of information and given plenty of practice in doing this. This has two main implications: firstly, children can be given tasks (or set their own tasks) which require them to locate their own information both in and out of school and, secondly, information sources in classrooms and schools could be arranged according to some system so that resource-location is a skilful affair and not just a haphazard 'sort through that pile of pamphlets'. The development of this system especially in classrooms can, I suggest, be done by the children themselves, who will learn by sorting out material and also provide the means by which other children can learn.

In attempting this in my own classroom I found that the children's sorting criteria were rather haphazard until it was suggested to them that they follow the system already in use in the school library (Dewey).

After this they were able to classify material quite readily and we now have a resource system which, because it is smaller, provides a valuable training ground for the skills which are necessary for the use of the main library.

Information sources and young children

Following on from the last point, it might be preferable, especially with younger children, if the range of information sources they are presented with is at first limited so as not to bewilder them. Although children can in my experience manage information quite adequately if they are taught the requisite skills, it is still slightly unreasonable to expect young children to master the workings of, to them, an enormous library of books, without some form of lead-in work. One way of preparing them for the full library is for the teacher to make an initial selection of books for the children to use and gradually to increase the size of this until the children are ready to face the complete library. Even then I would suggest the teacher work carefully alongside the children to ensure that the skills they require are being exercised.

Developing efficient reading.

There was evidence in my findings, in reading diaries from other classes, that where the children were pursuing 'topic' work, they were often using only one book. It would be hard to prove without actually examining their work but the suspicion was aroused that children were often engaged in simply copying out texts they had read. Certainly this was found to be the case in many primary schools by the HMI Survey (HMI, 1978).

I would suggest there are two major ways in which this purposeless copying could be minimised. Firstly teachers could insist that children use a variety of information sources in their project work. There is no reason why children could not be asked to list their sources of information as a bibliography after their completed work. Secondly children could be encouraged to establish a set of reading purposes (in the form of questions) before they begin their work. These purposes may alter as they work but establishing a set at the outset of their work will help them organise their reading in a purposeful manner. The linking of purposes with resources in a systematic manner is also possible and this will give the children a valuable planning tool for their topic (Open University, 1973).

Also, of course, there are skills which the children can be taught which will help them approach their reading in a more purposeful manner. Skimming, scanning and the use of the SQ3R study method are obvious examples here.

I believe the points I have raised have important implications for the provision and use of resources in the primary school. If nothing else, I would hope they bring out the fact that much more consideration needs to be given both to the quality and range of resources provided in schools, and to ways of developing effective use of these resources. Neither of these will just happen; they both need thought and study. I hope I have provided some starting points for this.

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