School-Based Staff Development to Encourage Reading in Elementary and Middle Schools

Linda Mixon Clary
Augusta College

WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
**Dorothy J. McGinnis
Reading Center and Clinic**

School-Based Staff Development to Encourage Reading in Elementary and Middle Schools

Linda Mixon Clary

Recent educational reports, conferences, and articles have urged schools to allow students to read more than the seven to eight minutes per day currently allocated in many schools. According to the authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott and Wilkinson, 1984) motivation is a key element in becoming a skilled reader, and students will read when books are accessible. Unfortunately, the basic skills emphasis of the last several years has drawn our attention away from emphasizing wide reading in school and allowing allowing school time for students to read. This article contains several ideas for staff developers to use in helping schools plan how to encourage wide reading.

Needs in reading
The distinction of a successful reading program is developing students who like to read well and who will read often (Winograd and Greenlee, 1986). In recent years, in approximately 95% of the elementary schools in this country, the reading process has been taught with basal readers (Aukerman, 1981). These readers have a well-defined, systematic scope and sequence of skills that students must

master when tested. The stories are relatively short with controlled vocabulary. While publishers do not intend that they become the total reading curriculum, time constraints often allow for few other reading activities. Yet most basal reader authors agree that the skills taught in the basal need to be practiced and extended in additional reading from quality books. Time pressures, however, often lead to the omission of that practice.

Basal reading instruction has been common in this country since the 1950's. However, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson et al., 1984) reviews the poor showing of American students in reading when their achievement is compared to other countries. An estimated 20% of the adult population have reading difficulties that impede their daily functioning in society (Stedman and Kaestle, 1987). The reading demands of daily life grow more and more complex as our world becomes more information-oriented. Reed (1988) suggests that as students get older, they often "...are not motivated to read; even if they are motivated, they can't find books they want to read." Given these problems, something needs to be improved in our current reading instructional programs.

There is a startling contrast when we compare students who are read to often as young children and who read independently as they get older to those taught only through school instructional programs. The "readers" learn to read more easily (Durkin, 1974-75; Teale, 1981; Freeman and Wasserman, 1987), they have more extensive vocabularies (Nagy, Herman and Anderson, 1985; Cullinan, Jaggar and Strickland, 1974), and they are more interested in reading while learning to use written language proficiently (Tierney and Pearson, 1983). There is a dire need for students to spend far more time in independent

reading, both in and out of school, in order to achieve gains in reading achievement (Anderson et al., 1984). Along with higher test scores, wide reading yields great enjoyment and appreciation of reading (Aaron, 1987) and a better understanding of self and others (Winkeljohann and Gallant, 1981).

Reading activities

School-based staff development is needed to help develop ideas to promote and motivate wide reading so that all students can reap the benefits of that practice. The following activities represent a school-based program designed to focus attention on wide reading of quality literature and motivate youngsters to read for pleasure and practice. These activities can be explored in short staff development sessions and implemented immediately with relatively few resources other than the time and effort involved.

• View the videotape *Booktalks* by J. Brodart (1986) as a kick-off to these activities. These short, interesting excerpts of books, presented in ways to entice the audience to read the book itself, are motivating to students and teachers. Not only is the tape instructional for learning to do booktalks, it is interesting as well and includes several sample presentations in the printed materials that accompany it. See and react to the video one week, work on preparing and practicing some booktalks the next week, and then present them to students. Meet with other teachers to get reactions and make modifications.

• Hold a book-making workshop where teachers learn to make and bind their own books. If someone on the staff or in the school district can act as a leader, provide released time for preparation. Concise directions can be found in sources such as *Children's Literature in the Elementary*

School (Huck, Hepler and Hickman, 1987). If teachers do not have a story or a collection of their own or of their students to bind, bind a blank book that can be written later. Allow about two hours of time one week or two one-hour sessions over a couple of weeks. Place the finished books in circulation in the library. Publicize the news that they are there, and watch enthusiasm grow for reading them. Encourage teachers to teach their students the bookbinding process, and follow the same procedure with students' compositions.

• Work in your local community with Adopt-a-School sponsors, PTAs, civic groups or a publishing company to pay for inviting an author popular with students to school for a luncheon or breakfast. Sell tickets if necessary to offset the expense. Have students and teachers read the author's work before the affair, and then have both groups, plus interested community members, attend, ask questions, buy autographed books, and meet in small classroom groups. If a visit is not possible, follow the format above but use a conference telephone call as the contact. The pamphlet *Dial an Author* by Pat Scales (1981) is an excellent resource for planning such an exciting event.

• Have teachers think of their favorite book when they were the age of their students. Hold a staff development session where they make an art project such as a small quilt or collage with individual sections about the favorite books. Follow up with a second session to complete the project and hang it in a prominent place in the school. Such a large display attracts students' attention and often motivates them to read a favorite teacher's book selection. Classes might follow up with a similar project within the class.

• Ask a librarian to talk about the selection aids available for choosing books appropriate for certain ages, interests, sexes, and developmental levels. Emphasize those already available in the school, and/or allow teachers to order those that they think will be helpful. References such as those found in Figure 1 can be very helpful in supporting teachers as they work toward more emphasis on reading.

Figure 1: *Selection Aids*

• Dreyer, S.S. (Ed.). (1985). *The bookfinder: A guide to children's literature about the needs and problems of youth aged 2-15.* Three volumes. Circle Pines MN: American Guidance Services.

• *Junior High School Library Catalog*, 5. (1985). Bronx NY: H.W. Wilson.

• Monson, D. (Ed.). (1985). *Adventuring with books.* Urbana IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

• Reed, A.J.S. (1988). *Comics to classics: A parent's guide to books for teens and preteens.* Newark DE: International Reading Association.

• Tway, E. (Ed.). (1981). *Reading ladders to human relations.* Washington DC: National Council of Teachers of English and American Council on Education.

• Winkel, L. (Ed.). (1984). *The elementary school library collections.* Williamsport PA: Bro-Dart Foundation.

• Use one or more short sessions for every teacher to prepare a booksharing activity appropriate for certain levels. These are motivational "book reports" that may take many formats. Some possible ways of sharing a book would be to dress as a favorite character and share a favorite scene in which the character appears. The teacher could tell a portion of the book with a flannel board, shadow box, or

even a puppet show. Use a Friday afternoon for teachers to share their activity with as many classes as time allows by circulating every ten minutes or so. A few weeks later, let students circulate among classes to share a book that they have read recently.

• Have an idea swap for a couple of weeks. Ask teachers to come to the staff development session with their favorite way of encouraging youngsters to read described in a one-page handout. Have each teacher briefly present the idea and share copies with everyone present. Have folders or notebooks available for collating the copies.

• Ask parents, students and school neighbors to donate old but still usable books to school. Prior to the staff development session, assemble them in the lunchroom or gym where there is plenty of space. Give every teacher a box and some colorful paper to cover it. Then, let them make a "start shelf" (Bishop, 1981) of books about a certain topic (perhaps one in the content areas) or by a particular author or of a certain type. Duplicate a master list of the "shelves" (boxes) when they are completed so that teachers may borrow from one another.

• Provide all the necessary materials for a "Make and Take" workshop for bulletin boards. If you use a basal series in your school, use it as a guide for books that correlate to stories. These are good ones to publicize. Have a media specialist as a resource for new ideas. Allow enough time for each teacher to make at least one bulletin board. When the finished products are put up, take pictures and compile them in an album for future reference. Teachers who use the same basals might then be able to trade with one another.

• Divide the faculty into groups. Have the necessary supplies and computer programs available for teachers to generate some word finds, crossword puzzles, banners, posters, and bingo cards about books. Follow this session with a second one where a master list can be made and a file set up with one copy of each idea that would be available to all teachers when they wanted to make transparencies, handouts, or games.

• Focus on the content areas for at least two sessions. Share selection aids such as those in Figure 2 that make it easier to relate books to the non-language arts areas. Then divide into small groups by subject areas of interest which select books for a short bibliography related to particular units of study. Follow up by brain-storming ways to work the books into the curriculum. Ask each group describe to the best strategies on paper, index cards or a database. Categorize by subjects, unit, and grade levels.

Figure 2
Selection Aids for Content Area Books

• Kobrin, D. (1988). *Eyeopeners: How to choose and use children's books about real people, places, and things.* New York: Penguin.

• Elleman, B. (Ed.). (1985). *Children's books of international interest.* Newark DE: International Reading Association.

• Mathias, M., & Thiessen, D. (1979). *Children's mathematics books: A critical bibliography.* Chicago IL: American Library Association.

• Metzner, S. (Ed.). (1973). *World history in juvenile books: A biographical and chronological guide.* Bronx NY: H.W. Wilson.

• *Subject guide to children's books in print.* (Annual). Ann Arbor MI: R.R. Bowker.

• Wolff, K. (1983). *Best science books for children.* Washington DC: American Association for the Advancement of Science.

• As a culminating activity, encourage teachers to develop plans for each grading period to incorporate what they have learned in their classrooms. A handout such as Figure 3 is helpful in organizing plans. These might be prepared in grade levels or individually and coordinated across grades so that there is not a lot of undesired repetition as students progress through school.

Figure 3
Plans for Promoting Wider Reading

Teacher   *Grade*   *Dates*

1. Genres to be used _____

_____

2. Specific titles for reading aloud _____

_____

3. Bulletin boards to highlight reading (sketch)

_____

4. Booksharing activities for this period _____

_____

5. Book extension activities that students will do _____

_____

6. Booktalks to be presented _____

_____

7. Special projects involving reading _____

_____

8. Ways to correlate wide reading to our primary instructional program

_____

Recommendations for staff development

This school-based staff development program can be easily implemented by staff developers within a school, district level personnel, principals, and/or outside consultants. It is planned with attention to the characteristics of effective programs (Hinson, Caldwell and Landrum, 1989). Use of these activities as an ongoing program presumes that the participants have acknowledged a need for this content and have helped plan how the activities will be used at this particular site. Such plans should include specific, local objectives, selection of activities to be used, scheduling modifications, and ways to share. The nature of these projects makes them informal and non-academic, characteristics of non-threatening workshops. The opportunities for released time, if used, would validate the importance of the project to the teachers involved. There are also built-in assignments for applying the strategies in the classroom and sharing results. This factor allows participants to do the activities themselves, observe others as they do theirs in the school, and discuss ideas and outcomes. Since most of the activities are done in groups, there is a support system that promotes collegiality inherent in the organization of the process. Almost every session has specified, hands-on components that participants can try immediately to see if they bring about desired results. Therefore, the most recognized characteristics of good staff development have been used in planning this program.

Youngsters in today's schools need to have wide reading emphasized in their instructional programs. Since this type activity has not been a priority in many schools in recent years, there is a need for school-based staff development that stresses specific ways of getting students motivated about reading. The activities presented here meet

those criteria and will have a positive impact on the reading
habits of the young people in schools where they are used.

References
Aaron, I.E. (1987). Enriching the basal reading program with literature. In B.
    Cullinan (Ed.), *Literature in the reading program*, 126-138. Newark DE:
    International Reading Association.
Anderson, R.C., Hiebert, E.H., Scott, J.A., & Wilkinson, I.A.G. (1984).
    Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the commission on reading.
    Washington D.C.: The National Institute of Education.
Aukerman, R. (1981). *The basal reader approach to reading.* New York:
    Wiley.
Bishop, D. (1981). Motivating adolescent readers via starter shelves in con-
    tent area classes. In A.J. Ciani (Ed.), *Motivating reluctant readers.* Newark
    DE: International Reading Association.
Brodart, J. (1986). Booktalking videotape and guide. Bronx NY: H.W. Wilson.
Cullinan, B.E., Jaggar, A., & Strickland, D. (1974). Language expansion for
    black children in the primary grades. *Young Children, 29,* 98-112.
Durkin, D. (1974-75). A six year study of children who learned to read in
    school at the age of four. *Reading Research Quarterly, 10,* 9-61.
Freeman, E.B., & Wasserman, V. (1987). A will before there's a way:
    Preschoolers and books. *Reading Horizons, 27,* 112-122.
Hinson, S., Caldwell, M.S., & Landrum, M. (1989). Characteristics of success-
    ful staff development programs. *Journal of Staff Development, 10,* 48-52.
Huck, C., Hepler, S., & Hickman, J. (1987). *Children's literature in the elemen-
    tary school, 4.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
Nagy, W.E., Herman, P.A., & Anderson, R.E. (1985). Learning words from
    contexts. *Reading Research Quarterly, 20,* 233-253.
Reed, A.J.S. (1988). *Comics to classics: A parent's guide to books for teens
    and preteens.* Newark DE: International Reading Association.
Scales, P. (1981). *Dial an author: How to develop a successful reader-writer
    interview program.* New York: Bantam.
Stedman, L., & Kaestle, C. (1987). Literacy and reading performance in the
    U.S. from 1880 to the present. *Reading Research Quarterly, 22,* 8-46.
Teale, W.H. (1987). Parents reading to their children. *Language Arts, 58,*
    902-912.
Tierney, R.J., & Pearson, P.D. (1983). Toward a composing model of reading.
    Language Arts, 60, 568-583.
Winkeljohann, R., & Gallant, R. (1981). Growing into self. In E. Tway (Ed.),
    Reading ladders to human relations. Urbana IL: National Council of
    Teachers of English and American Council on Education.
Winograd, P., & Greenlee, M. (1986). Students need a balanced reading
    program. *Educational Leadership, 43,* 16-21.

*Linda Mixon Clary is a faculty member in the School of
Education at Augusta College, Augusta Georgia.*