Chapter 2
Group Directed
Reading-Thinking
Activities

A recent Columbia-Carnegie study (6) concerned with the Beliefs and Practices of Teachers in Elementary Reading revealed that reading instruction in almost all schools starts with basic readers. The study involved two samples: a random sample of over three hundred public elementary schools throughout the United States; and a sample of systems selected from the associated Public School Systems panel as exemplifying the best in current public education. "Basic readers from a graded series are used by 99 percent of first grade teachers in both samples, and by 92 to 94 percent of second and third grade teachers, on 'all or most days in the year.' " (6)

A survey by Staiger (31) on how basal readers are used showed that approximately 90 percent of the schools in the United States use one or more basal reading series.

Interestingly enough, another Carnegie sponsored study (4) done at Harvard University on the training of elementary classroom teachers provides explanation of a kind for this widespread practice. One question in this survey inquired about the degree of use of basal reading text(s). Seventy-five percent indicate a use of the texts at either the primary grades or all grades, and 16 percent more use them but not as a chief tool. Apparently pre-service teacher training schools place much emphasis on the use of basal reading series in courses on the teaching of reading. This is one reason, most likely, why some of the publishers of major basic reading series keep supplying and resupplying sets of their series to the materials centers of colleges and universities preparing tomorrow's teachers.

Methods of grouping was another area of inquiry in this survey. Forty-one percent of those replying indicated that they use group instruction by reading ability with some provision for individual instruction. Another 28 per-
cent group for instruction using interests and different purposes as criteria. Two percent checked using homogeneous classroom instruction by reading ability, and 25 percent checked multiple answers indicating that they probably use one or another method of grouping for instruction. In general, the great majority is holding to group instruction as a means of organizing the reading program within the classroom. It might also be said that flexibility of grouping is being done on the instructional skill basis and is of considerable importance for effective teaching.

Another recent survey was done by Groff (13) to analyze changes within groups in basal reading instruction in Grades 2, 3, and 4 as reported by student teachers in sixty-six classrooms. Among other things, it was reported that there was a larger percentage of pupil changes from group to group in the first weeks than later. The total number of changes was comparatively small in proportion to the total number of pupils (N=2179) involved. This study provides some specifics regarding flexibility of grouping practices insofar as pupil changes are concerned.

These surveys give support to recent statements about grouping practices made by Harris (5), McKim (22), and Sheldon (30). In general, they point out that the most common organization for reading instruction is that of the small group composed of pupils with similar instructional needs. In addition, three reading groups in a classroom seem to be most widely used as an intraclass organizational plan.

Other organizational plans include a range from homogeneous classroom instruction by reading ability, interest groups, small skill-groups, to individualized instruction. Each reflects an earnest desire to improve reading instruction and make it more effective. Not only is there a strong, persistent, and compelling desire to adapt instruction to the needs of the children, but also more recently to the personality and know-how of the teacher. Regardless of the purpose, it may safely be said that much of the basic reading instruction is being accomplished by working with pupils grouped for instruction and using basic readers as the source material. This being the case, the development of sound group instruction presupposes a clear understanding of the fundamental purposes of basic reading instruction and of the fundamental processes involved.

Why a Directed Reading-Thinking Activity Plan?

Sometimes the words traditional and modern and progressive are used by their advocates to imply "ideal" and, therefore, are to be accepted without question. Regardless of how much one respects the good faith of those who make such claims, it is difficult to see that they are justified.

Similarly, individualized and group instruction advocates go on to say that theirs is the pedagogy that is sound and scientific and is based on measures
of human growth and behavior. But, what is scientific pedagogy? Is it not a means of testing purposes or hypotheses or conjectures in an atmosphere freed from coercion, formed in the light of human experience, tempered by humility and compassion, and denied or defended courageously and objectively?

Both procedures—group directed reading activities in which each member of the group deals with the same material, and individualized activities in which each may be reading different kinds of materials—have numerous advantages. In discussing the group approach, it is necessary to understand that this is not a defense of a regimented group or a classroom, nor of the use on pupils of a birch rod, nor of a tyrannically dogmatic teacher.

While the phonics versus the whole-word method controversy has been raging on the national scene, a far more significant change has been occurring quietly behind the scene. Articles dealing with reading and thinking have been appearing with increasing frequency in professional periodicals. Even the most ardent phonic advocates write about the need for reading with comprehension. In fact, it seems that all people agree that reading without understanding is not reading, and many agree also that the reading and thinking processes are almost identical. It is ideas such as these followed by actions that presage the quiet revolution and give evidence of the increasing concern on the national scene that reading be taught as a thinking process.

This concern about reading and thinking and about practices to develop thinking readers was ushered in during the silent reading era of the early twentieth century (25). Great concern was expressed about the prevailing "round-robin" oral reading practices. These were the practices whereby the pupils studied a reading lesson, usually at home, so as to be prepared to take turns reading it orally in school. As authorities pointed out, these practices did no more than develop word callers.

Now, in the latter half of the twentieth century, we are concerned about the prevailing "round-robin" silent reading practices. These are the practices whereby the teacher asks all the questions, usually questions of fact; and the pupils read to find the literal answers to the teacher-asked questions. This mechanized, rote reproduction approach to reading by-passes the need for logical, creative, and evaluative thinking on the part of pupils. All pupils need to do is reproduce the facts, usually in sequence, to satisfy teacher questions. As authorities are now pointing out, these practices do no more than develop nonthinking fact parrots.

It has taken almost half a century to affect marked changes in classroom practices and to eliminate, in large part, the round-robin oral reading procedures. In the process, authorities in 1924 went so far as to ignore oral reading entirely (25). As Paul (26) indicated twelve years later, good oral reading practices were never really dropped by classroom teachers. As stated earlier, approximately 90 percent of the schools in the United States
now use one or another basic reading series. Most of these series spell out in detail plans built almost exclusively around teacher questions and pupil parroted answers. It is hoped that the movement toward the teaching of reading on a thinking basis will not need half a century to eradicate the round-robin silent reading practices.

Reading, like thinking, is a mental process. It requires symbols (words) that stand for ideas or concepts produced by a writer. It requires a reader’s use of his experience and knowledge to reconstruct the ideas or concepts produced by the writer. The process of reconstruction begins, goes on, and is in continual change as long as a person reads.

The reconstruction process begins with a state of doubt or of desire on the part of the reader about some questions such as: why did the early settlers continue to move westward? or why did man use stick plows exclusively until the seventeenth century? Such difficulties present a perplexity and require hesitation. It is then that thinking can foster hypotheses and imagination. Or, some personal-social interests foster a curiosity that may result in vague, partially declared desires to read; or in clearly-recognized desires for enjoyment, amusement, or satisfaction. Regardless of motivation, the process begins in the mind of a reader. He must experience the state of doubt or of desire so that his reading will result in one of inquiry or amusement.

Reading, like thinking, always requires the framework of a context. Fiction or nonfiction may be the framework for reading. For thinking, it may be reality or imagination. The act of reflective thinking can follow the same form, whether the stimulus for thought be real or imagined. And the act of reflective reading can follow the same form, regardless of the context.

Reading, like thinking, is in continual change. At every turning of a page, or even a phrase, the reader has to take into account the context—its parts, its problems, its perplexities. From these he must be able to follow the threads of a plot that point the way toward the plot end. Or, he must follow the course of ideas in nonfiction that lead to an outcome or solution. He must assess what he finds, weigh it, accept or reject it, or alter his objectives.

It is apparent, therefore, that both reading and thinking start with a state of doubt or of desire. It is apparent also that the process of reconstructing goes on as inquiry or discovery, until the doubt is resolved, the perplexity settled, or the pleasure attained.

Training in reading that embodies the dynamics of discovery and accuracy results in a systematic examination of ideas. Such training is best accomplished in a group situation where discussion can do for thinking what testing on real objects does for seeing. Group Directed Reading-Thinking Activities help a pupil become aware of discrepancies between his and others’ interpretation of the same passage or idea, and force him to weigh the evidence in favor of alternative interpretations. Convictions and doubts from one’s personal world can be compared and contrasted with those of
others. Then, by seeing differences between ideas, it becomes possible for each to modify his own world if he wishes. Furthermore, as each reader in the group hears a variety of interpretations of the same context, he sees also that the usefulness of each must be tested in its own right (1).

Obviously, to develop sound thinking skills during group instruction there can be no subjugation of the individual to an organized "brainwashing" for the purpose of imposing an idea or a dogma. Rather, there must be a free reading-thinking circumstance that permits students almost regardless of age to better understand the effects of reciprocal and systematic judgment. The aim is to provide the learner with a set of skills over which he has control, and with which he can make judgments when he is reading and thinking in the privacy of his own closet. Students trained this way do not become docile, unimaginative, or stereotyped in their reading.

Freedom to declare purposes—to speculate, whether dealing with fact or fiction—has as its concomitant a responsibility to observe all available clues, to order them, and to draw forth guesses or speculations that are within the realm of plausibility. Once a student has become involved in a reading situation through the use of his own ideas, he will want to read to test his ideas. This self-actualizing tendency has tremendous motivating potential (28). Students who help to create a reading climate, strive also to maintain it; and they do so with an astonishing degree of integrity. When pupils realize that it is the boldness of their thinking that is being sought, they also realize that the experience is better than parroting; it is invigorating.

The teacher is the focal point in the act of directing a reading-thinking activity. A teacher needs to know the story being read or the subject matter being dealt with; have a lively imagination; be willing to parry, agitate and convert ideas presented; and be convinced that reading is a process of active searching and inquiry. The teacher should ask questions that stimulate the students to tell why they inquire and interpret as they do.

A Directed Reading-Thinking Activity Plan

A group type directed reading-thinking activity has two distinguishing features. All members of a group read at about the same level of competency and all read the same material at the same time. Pupil achievement level or instructional level is best determined by means of an informal reading inventory including word attack skills, a general language inventory including spelling, daily observations of reading performance and a wise use of standardized test results. Basic readers are most useful for the development of foundation skills of reading. Other materials may be used, however. In other words, a D-R-T-A can be effective using science or social science materials and so on, or using periodicals, newspapers, or books, and so on.

The primary objective of group D-R-T-A training is to develop skill in
reading critically. A critical reading performance requires each reader to become skilled at determining purposes for reading. Either the reader declares his own purposes or if he adopts the purposes of others, he makes certain he knows how and why he is doing so. He also speculates about the nature and complexity of the answers he is seeking by using to the fullest his experience and knowledge relevant to the circumstances. Then he reads to test his purposes and his assumptions. As a result, he may: one, find the answer(s) he is seeking literally and completely stated; two, find only partial answers or implied answers and face the need to either restate his purposes in light of the new information gained or to suspend judgment until more reading has been done; three, need to declare completely new purposes.

This problem solving approach to reading may be used with fiction and nonfiction. The purposes in either circumstance will vary according to the reader's ability to perform critically and creatively and to his level of maturity. His reading rate will vary according to the purposes declared and the nature and difficulty of the material.

Proof that answers have been found either in part or completely may be provided to the group by means of oral rereading or by oral or written reporting. Each means of providing proof should be used. At the primary level more frequent use may be made of oral means of providing proof than at the intermediate level and beyond.

Each pupil uses the word attack skills he has learned as he sees a need to do so. So-called “new words” as listed in vocabulary lists of basic readers are not “taught” in advance of the reading of a story or selection. The controlled vocabulary context of a basic reader is especially designed to give the reader an opportunity to use his word attack skills in a context that will not frustrate him by making excessive demands. Furthermore, he uses his skills under the immediate supervision of a teacher. As soon as a glossary is provided the pupil is trained to turn there for help in pronunciation and meaning before turning to the teacher.

The teacher sets the climate for a D-R-T-A and directs the process. This she does by the frequent use of three questions: “What do you think?” “Why do you think so?” and “Can you prove it?” While the children are reading, she remains available constantly to provide help as needed in word recognition or in comprehension. Follow-up training on skill needs are best determined by this means.

Group sizes considered most acceptable for good teaching range from eight to twelve members. Groups of this size permit pupils to compare and contrast their thinking with that of others in the dynamics of interacting minds. Each can observe how others use evidence, make assumptions or educated guesses, adapt rate, provide proof, and perform creatively.

Certain basic principles and assumptions underlie the effective develop-
ment of a group directed reading-thinking activity. They may be listed as follows:

I. Identifying purposes of reading
   A. Individual pupil purposes delimited by
      1. Pupil experience, intelligence and language facility
      2. Pupil interests, needs, and goals
      3. Group interests, needs, and goals
      4. Influence of the teacher
      5. Influence of the content
         a. nature and difficulty of the material
         b. title and subtitles
         c. pictures, maps, graphs, charts
         d. linguistics clues
   B. Group purposes determined by the
      1. Experiences, language facility, and intelligence of each member of group
      2. Interests, needs, and goals of each member of the group
      3. Consensus of the group and/or of subgroups
      4. Influence of the teacher
      5. Influence of the content
II. Adjusting rate of reading to the purposes declared and to the nature and difficulty of the material. This adjustment is made to
   A. Survey: to overview a selection or text
   B. Skim: to read swiftly and lightly for single points.
   C. Scan: to read carefully from point to point
   D. Read critically: to read, to reread, and to reflect so as to pass judgment
III. Observing the reading
   A. Noting abilities to adjust rate to purpose and material
   B. Recognizing comprehension needs and providing help by clarifying
      1. Purposes
      2. Concepts
      3. Need for rereading
   C. Acknowledging requests for help with word recognition needs by providing immediate help in the use of
      1. Context clues: meaning clues
      2. Phonetic clues: sound clues
      3. Structural clues: sight clues
      4. Glossary clues: meaning, sound, and sight clues
IV. Developing comprehension
   A. Checking on individual and group purposes
   B. Staying with or redefining purposes
C. Recognizing the need for other source material
D. Developing concepts
V. Fundamental skill training activities: discussion, further reading, additional study, writing
   A. Increasing powers of observation (directed attention)
   B. Increasing powers of reflection by
      1. Abstracting: reorganizing old ideas, conceiving new ideas, distinguishing between ideas, generalizing about ideas, and making inductions and analyses
      2. Judgment: formulating propositions and asserting them
      3. Reasoning: inferring and demonstrating, and systematizing knowledge deductively
   C. Mastering the skills of word recognition: picture and language context analysis, phonetic and structural analysis, and dictionary usage.
   D. Developing vocabulary: pronunciations; word meanings; semantic dimensions; analogous words, contrasted words; word histories; new words
   E. Developing adeptness in conceptualization and cognitive functioning: making and testing inferences; particulars, classes, and categories; reversibility, mobile equilibrium and conservation
   F. Mastering the skills of oral reading: voice enunciation, and expression; reading to prove a point or to present information; reading to entertain (prose and poetry); choral reading.

It should be evident at once that this D-R-T-A plan is not a process standing alone, to be used only in directing the reading of material in a basal reader. Its doctrines are fundamental to problem solving, abstracting and analyzing information, propaganda analysis, and similar frequently occurring activities in which reading serves as an aid in the lives of children as well as adults in their search for truth and beauty. The attitude of straight thinking required to draw inferences, to evaluate relevances, to grasp sequences, to draw tentative conclusions, to suspend judgment, to evaluate and make decisions of judgment can be taught and acquired through suitable classroom procedures in most curricular areas.

Everyone agrees that in the process of becoming educated a student may not rely on the unsystematic, catch-as-catch-can sort of thinking of everyday living. The literate man differs from the illiterate man in what he does about learning (2). A student starts with a problem or purpose to be resolved or accomplished. Then he collects relevant facts; groups the facts; and uses the facts to predict, control, and determine a means to an end. Similarly, the skilled reader differs from the unskilled reader by what he does in order to read. The purposes he sets determine how and what he reads. The literate man and the skilled reader when reading for information perform like the
research man. They set up the equivalent of a null hypothesis and are as interested in evidence that disproves the hypothesis as they are in evidence that supports it.

**Developing Purposes for Reading**

The key step in a Directed Reading-Thinking Activity is this very first step: developing purposes for reading. As described in Chapter 1, purposes or questions or set represent the directional and motivating influences that get a reader started, keep him on course, and produce the vigor and potency and push to carry him through to the end.

Purposes for reading represent the key element in versatility. The versatile reader adjusts rate of reading according to his purposes for reading, and to the nature and difficulty of the material being read. By focusing on purposes for reading from the very beginning of formal instruction, the reader acquires an attitude toward reading and an appreciation of the use and value of purposes for directing the reading act. In the early phases of the instructional program the young reader will not be particularly articulate about what he is doing and how he is doing it; but by repeated experience he will, as he matures, begin to see how to be deliberate. Of all the reading skills versatility is the one that authorities and teachers and readers find most frequently lacking. It is my honest conviction that a principal reason why students complete high school and college without accomplishing this high-order reading skill reflects the use of inappropriate methodology from the very beginning of reading instruction.

**Why pupil purposes?**

It has been said wisely that “to know that you know that you do not know” is the beginning of wisdom. Bacon (9) spoke about an appraisal of one’s ignorance as the beginning of wisdom. Dewey (10) says that the crucial problem for the teacher is to utilize the intellectual curiosity of a learner in such a way that the initiative and the questioning attitude lie with the learner. He has said also that a question well asked is half an answer. If, then, the beginning of wisdom is a just appraisal of one’s ignorance, the beginning of reading to seek wisdom is also a just appraisal of one’s ignorance.

The reading-thinking process begins in the mind of each reader as he experiences a state of doubt or curiosity about what he knows or does not know, and what he thinks will or will not happen or be reported. The reader must develop the ability to ask questions while reading fiction as well as nonfiction. The reader’s questions must reflect his best use of his experience and knowledge. (32)

When pupils have become involved in the dynamics of a purpose-setting
session, the self-commitment on an intellectual as well as an emotional level has tremendous motivating force. The power of this force is almost immeasurable as it compels and sustains the reader until an answer is found. The ideas a pupil declares are his ideas; they reflect his experience and knowledge, his association and projection, his ego. He is out to prove himself right or wrong. The self-actualizing tendency of self-declared purposes is enormous.

The reader, having helped to create the reading climate, will strive to maintain it. Its tempo is geared to the finding of answers and to the proving or disproving of conjectures. He will want to move forward to test his ideas, to seek, to reconstruct, to reflect, and to prove. What is most astonishing about all this is the integrity with which the reader operates. He is out to seek the truth, and this is his dedication.

What about teacher purposes?

The most mature and the most experienced person in a group is the teacher. The ideal situation is one in which the material being read is absolutely new to both the teacher and the pupils. In such a reading situation, the teacher can without pretense or condescension be an active reading-thinking member of a group.

Since this discussion applies primarily to the use of basic readers, that ideal situation does not apply. The teacher knows the story or article being read, and the pupils know that she knows it. Any conjecture ventured by a teacher will instantly be viewed by a group as either a tip-off or a gross distortion. On occasion, though, a teacher-purpose is acceptable in the over-all training of thinking readers.

What is the role of the teacher?

It is apparent that the role of the teacher is of vital importance. As Polya says:

Helping the Student. One of the most important tasks of the teacher is to help his students. This task is not quite easy; it demands time, practice, devotion, and sound principles.

The student should acquire as much experience of independent work as possible. But if he is left alone with his problem without any help or with insufficient help, he may make no progress at all. If the teacher helps too much, nothing is left to the student. The teacher should help, but not too much and not too little, so that the student shall have a reasonable share of the work. (27, p. 1)

The teacher must avoid being the instrument of authoritarianindoctrination. Her teaching must be such that the group is never intimidated by
the tyranny of a right teacher answer—one which the group dare not question. Tyranny, if it is to reside anywhere, especially in the use of basic reader stories and selections, must rest in the text and in the group.

If the teacher is to live up to our affirmation and so direct a reading activity that pupil thinking is both required and honored, she will be in a very important sense emotionally removed from the give-and-take—the predicting and confirming or rejecting—of the reading-thinking process. Her role is that of an agitator, as one second-grade boy described it—an intellectual agitator. In this capacity she asks and asks again: “What do you think?” “Why do you think so?” “Read the line(s) that proves it.” These directives are sufficiently specific to stir the minds of all school-age children. When the pupils state what they think, express their opinions, and listen to the ideas voiced by others in the group, then they will be reading to see who in the group is right, and why they are right.

With such motivation the pupils will not be reading to find an answer to satisfy a teacher-asked question. They will not be preoccupied with the fear of being wrong and rousing signs of displeasure in the teacher or of a sharp reprimand. Neither will they be preoccupied with currying the teacher’s favor. In turn, if they fail to find an answer, the blame of failure will not be projected on the teacher, since it was not a teacher question. This is the degree to which, and the sense in which, the teacher is emotionally freed from asserting the tyranny of a right answer. She is not impaled on her own boomerang. The tyranny rests with the pupil (I am right or wrong), the group (we are right or wrong), and the text (I have the answer).

It would be a serious error to think that the skills, abilities, and attitudes essential to functioning as a thinking reader could be accomplished without teacher guidance. Perfect learning—making the skills, abilities, and attitudes vital and functional parts of children’s reading performance—requires constant practice and coaching under the watchful eye of a competent teacher. It is only as a result of frequent practice with different materials, handled in different ways, that the art of searching for truth and beauty approaches mastery.

The role of the group

As Hullfish and Smith say: “Certainly, before the child enters kindergarten or the first grade he is already a going concern, a thinking, knowing, individual person. John B. Watson once said that by this time the child was a graduate student in learned responses” (18, p. 72). Certainly, it is the impact of the interaction of a group of thinking, knowing, individual persons dealing with the same story or material that sparks the resolving of the problematic aspects of a situation. The emphasis on personal interest or purpose, on the creative element of inferences, maintains the personal in-
tegrity of each member of the group. It is the development of thinking on
the part of all students that provides the thread that unites the group.

In turn, all members of the group are involved in the act of creating
hypotheses, conjectures, purposes, using them to guide their reading; and
reading to test their significance. It is here that the adequacy of reading
and of meaning is tested in the context of the group. It is the group which
demands that individual predictions, to be acknowledged, must be war-
ranted on the basis of available evidence. The group sits as auditors, author-
ized to examine the evidence, verify the questions and answers, and state the
results.

The role of the story

The story, especially at the primary level, provides the substance—the
matter—for cognition. The story has a title, a plot development, and a story
ending. The story is told by means of pictures and language conjoined in
such a way that both elements help develop the plot.

**Title clues.** A story title can be the equivalent of a central theme. It
has an over-all, encompassing value. It suggests the plot setting, possible
story trends, and possible outcomes. It plays a unifying role.

By way of illustration, the title of a story in a so-called “first” reader is:
once such a title can set in motion creative divergent thinking. It suggests
many ideas that are plausible within the limits of the information available.

Three concepts are given in this title, each within the grasp (experience
and knowledge) of six-year-olds. One-time is an idea all youngsters have
experienced. A one-time visit to a zoo, a one-time ride in an airplane, a
one-time fall from a Jungle gym, a one-time contact with measles, and so on.
Magic is a word that really sets their imaginations spinning—drawing out,
winding and twisting ideas into the most exciting of yarns. Garden is a
fairly common concept, and most children have some meaning for it.

One group of six-year-olds, asked to say what they thought a story with
a title: “A One-Time Magic Garden” would be about, said: “Maybe it’s
about a magic hat. It might be a magic hat that shoots cannon balls like
in the cartoons. Maybe it’s about a magic pumpkin that grows very big
in a day. Maybe a fairy turns the garden into gold and does it only once.”
These are speculations typical of six-year-olds. Adults are seldom able to
match the predictions of the children. They think on an adult level—less
imaginative and more realistic—and often are not as varied in their specula-
tions.

**First picture clues.** The picture in Fig. 2 introduces the characters
in the story including their dress, an animal, and a huge cornstalk that is
A One-Time Magic Garden

"This must be magic," said Bill.
"Dad just put it in this morning.
Then it was little, but see it now."

"I can see it go," said Cooky.
"It is going up as fast as a bird.
I wish I could go up on it."

"You can," said one of the twins.
"I will show you how."