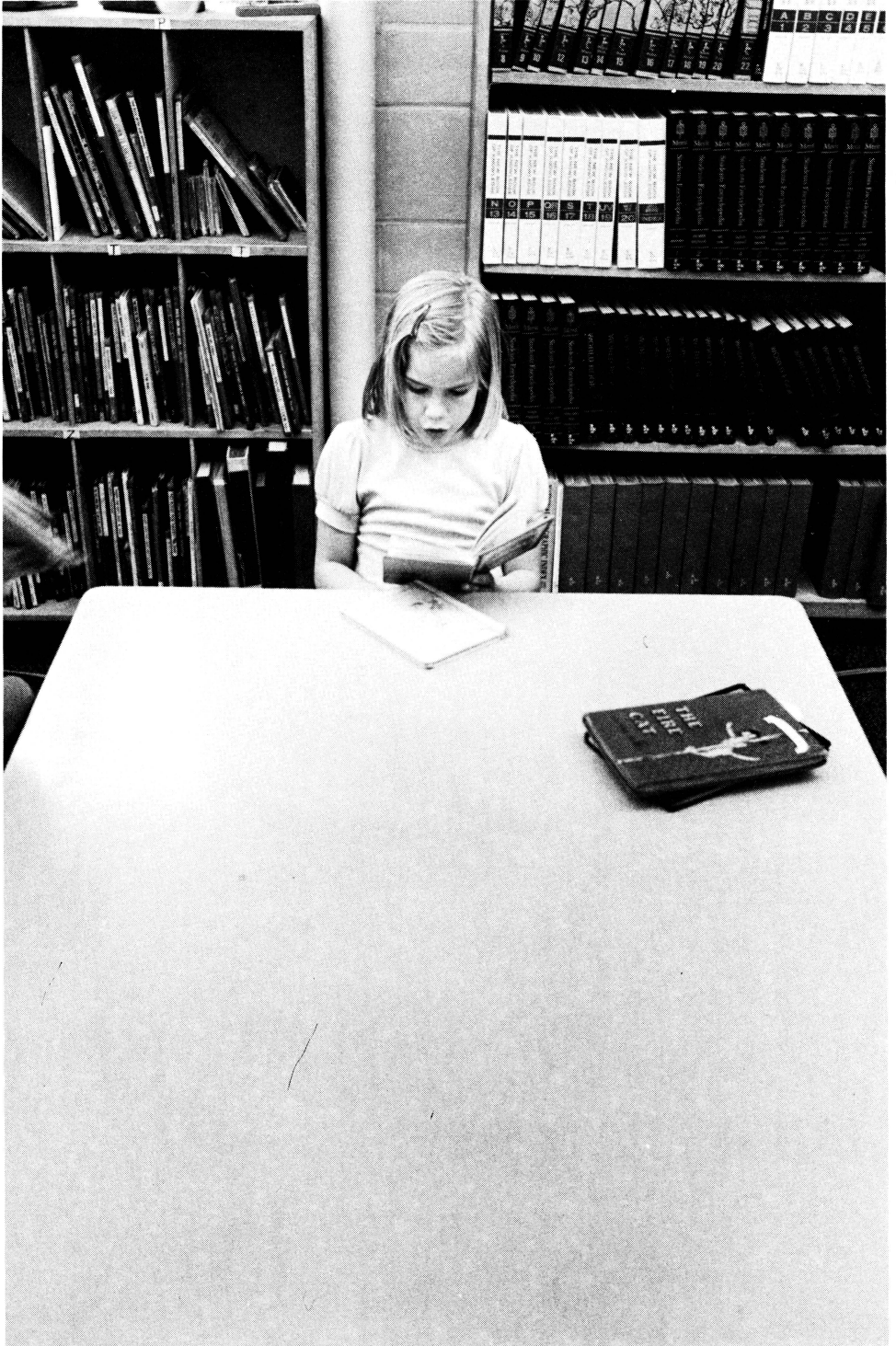
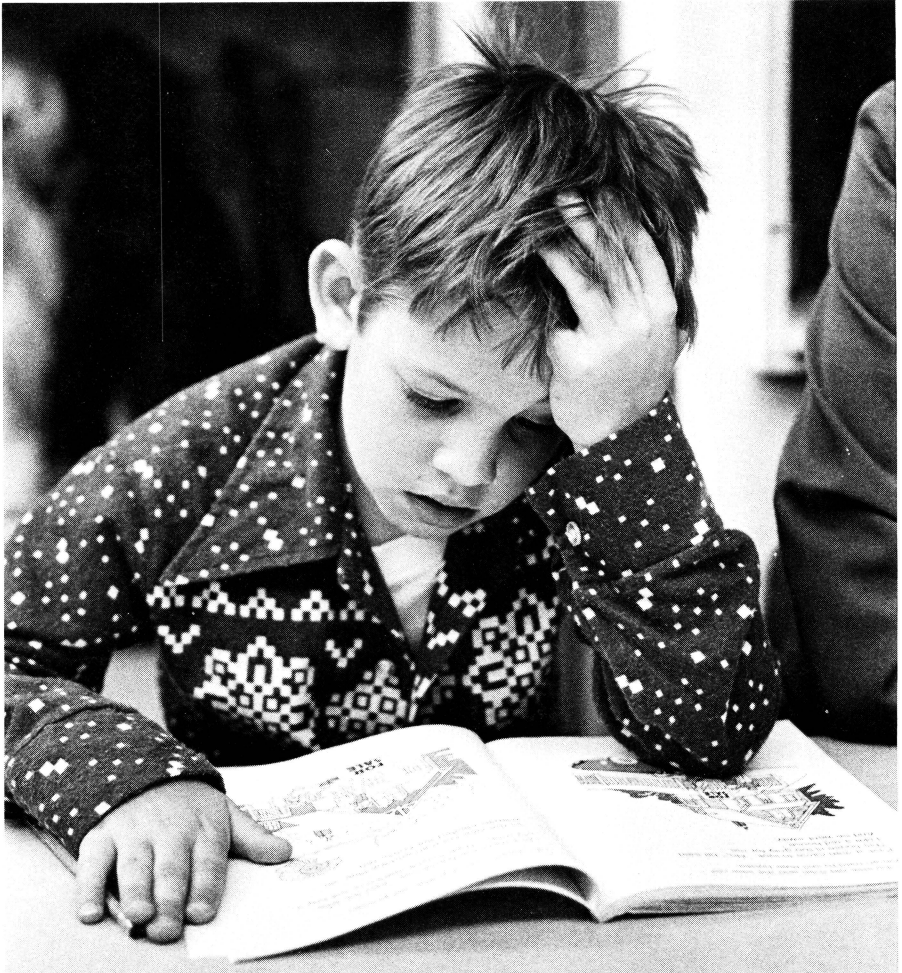


Reading Comprehension: What Do We Know?

Extension Division-University of Missouri-Columbia
Program of Continuing Professional Education

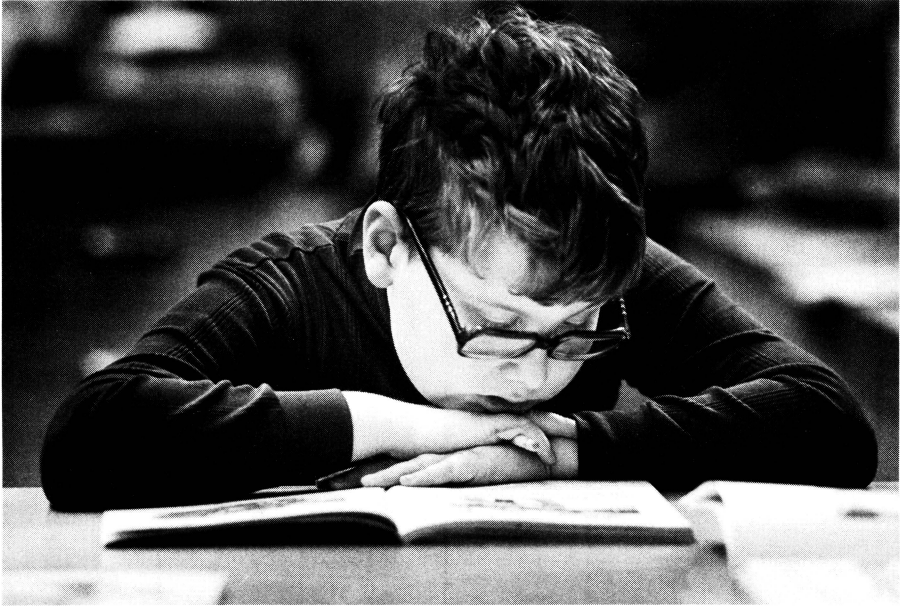




**“The only important thing in a book
is the meaning it has for you.”
W. Somerset Maugham**

Introduction

Is there a classroom teacher anywhere who has not at one time or another complained about reading problems related to comprehension? Probably not, for if a universal concern could be identified within most reading programs, it would almost certainly be the readers' understanding of the printed page. When asked to define comprehension it is often deceptively easy to explain

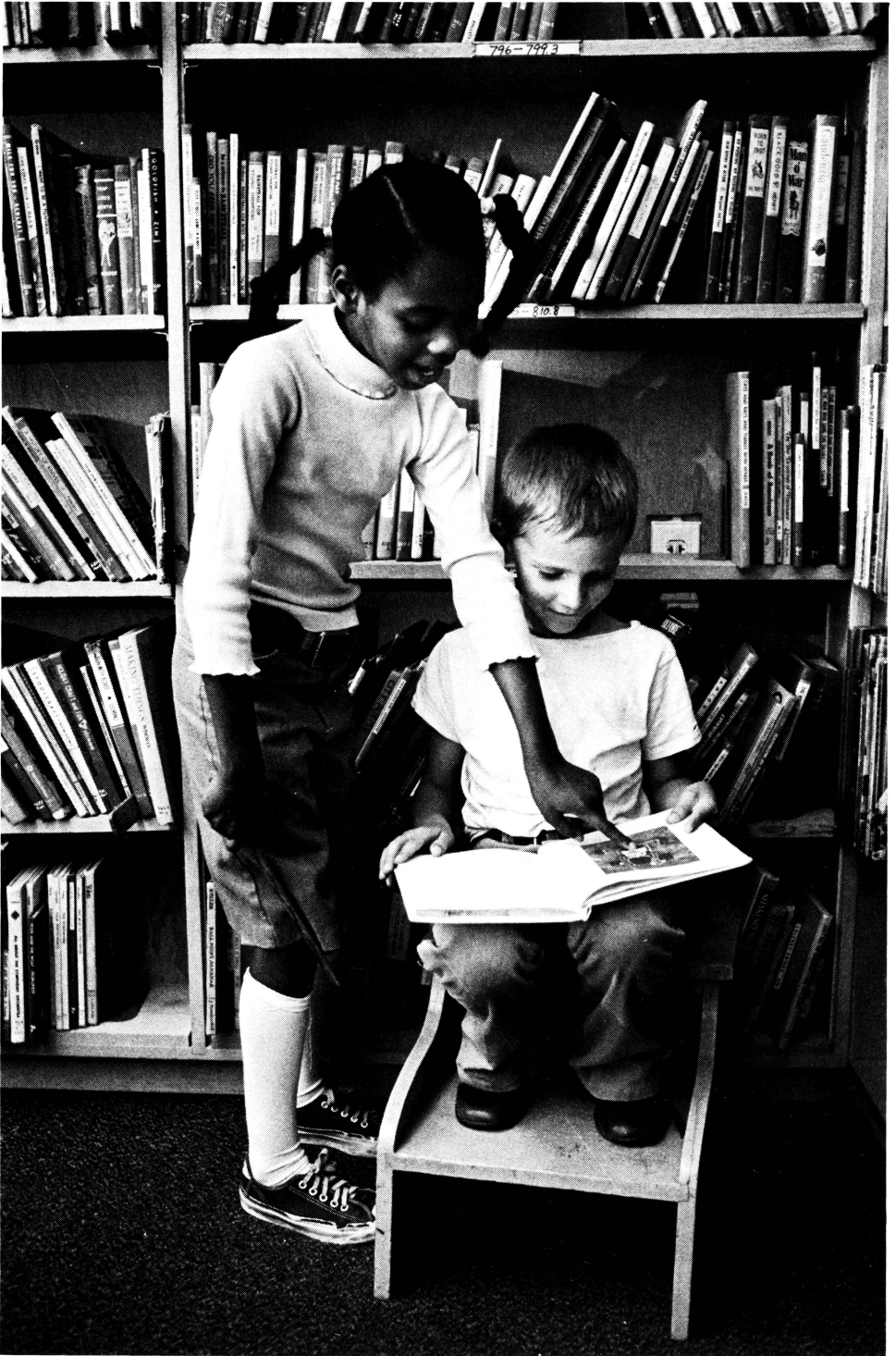


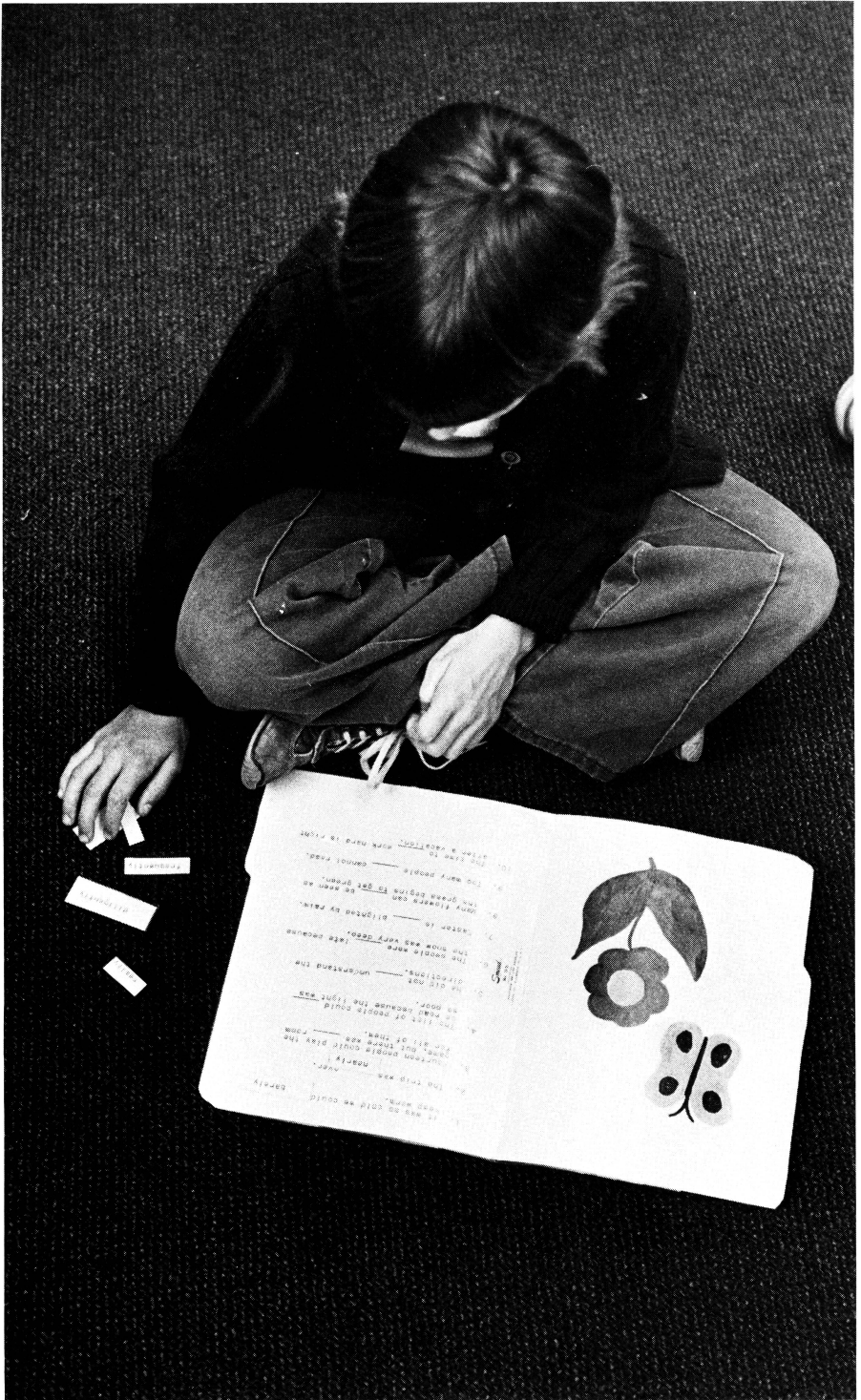
what information the reader is able to obtain from the words on the page or to describe meaning in terms of mastery levels of a number of isolated skills.

Recent research in comprehension, especially work being done in psycholinguistics and whole language, have given new insights into this area of reading education. Rather than limiting the definition of comprehension to a narrow concept based solely on lists of isolated skills and competencies, a broader viewpoint has been developed to include the uniqueness of each reader's background and experiences.

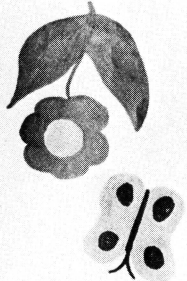
When we talk about reading and comprehension, we are really discussing the same thing. For if no meaning is created from the printed page, no reading has taken place. In this vastly complex process labeled *comprehension*, readers must relate to previous personal experiences, knowledge and opinions on the subject. Successful comprehension in its simplest terms, then, is the development of a link between reader and author which has as its basis the communication of information.

Traditionally, comprehension has been divided into large numbers of specific skills which then have been taught following a format that emphasizes drill on these individual elements. Rather than conceiving of comprehension as a natural extension of the child's vast knowledge of language (and thus a unified process encompassing not only reading but listening, writing and speaking as well), all too frequently understanding has been considered in a lockstep of isolated skills. Most of the current standardized reading tests have only reinforced this attitude by measuring comprehension as if it were composed of segmented skills. Thus, in many reading programs meaning becomes a secondary objective to the mastery of skills.

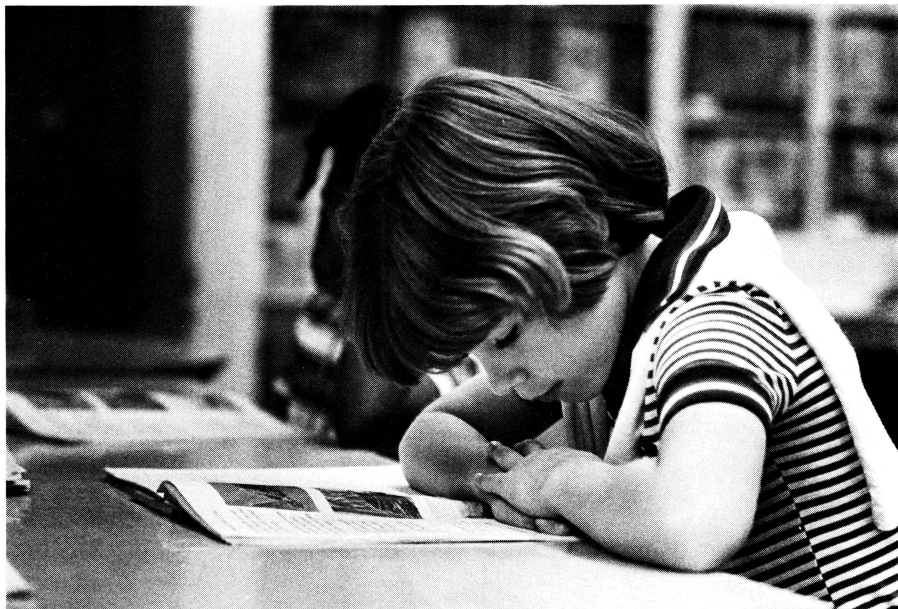




It was so cold we could hardly
keep warm.
The trip was really
hard. But there was the
best part. The people could play the
game all of them.
The first of people could
go back. Because the first was
at the end.
The people were
the snow was very deep.
The water is
dug out by hand.
The people can
see green as
they finish the
game. The
The water people
can't see
The water is
very cold.



fragment
discovery
the



Reading Is Meaning

A suggestion: classroom teachers should reconsider their personal definitions of reading comprehension in light of the basic premise, “reading is meaning.” Clearly this is not an appeal for additional reading materials nor a listing of new comprehension skills but rather a call for a change in teacher attitude. If comprehension is thought of as a personal experience which is shaped by each student’s past knowledge of the subject being read, then the importance of allowing children to express opinions and relate in an individual manner to the material becomes evident.

Teachers can best help their students comprehend by allowing them the opportunity to search for meaning. Readers will sometimes make mistakes which require them to reread for additional information. Knowing this questioning process is the first sign of real understanding on the part of the reader, teachers will not be disturbed when students take chances with meaning. Making an error about the reading passage and then realizing the problem clearly shows comprehension is taking place.

Many of these current ideas concerning reading comprehension may disturb those of us who were trained in a skills-oriented program. Yet, when we consider the goals to be achieved simply through the mastery of isolated drills and exercises, it becomes clear that often very little was accomplished. With our increased awareness of the unique experiences and understandings the individual brings to the printed page, perhaps we will truly be able to define comprehension as *reading for meaning*.

Strategies for Teaching Comprehension

The following suggestions are presented as possible areas classroom teachers may want to consider in the development of an effective reading comprehension program. These points have been kept intentionally general in content because in all teaching, but especially when dealing with reading comprehension, the uniqueness of the learner and the circumstances in which the instruction takes place are primary considerations in determining levels of understanding.

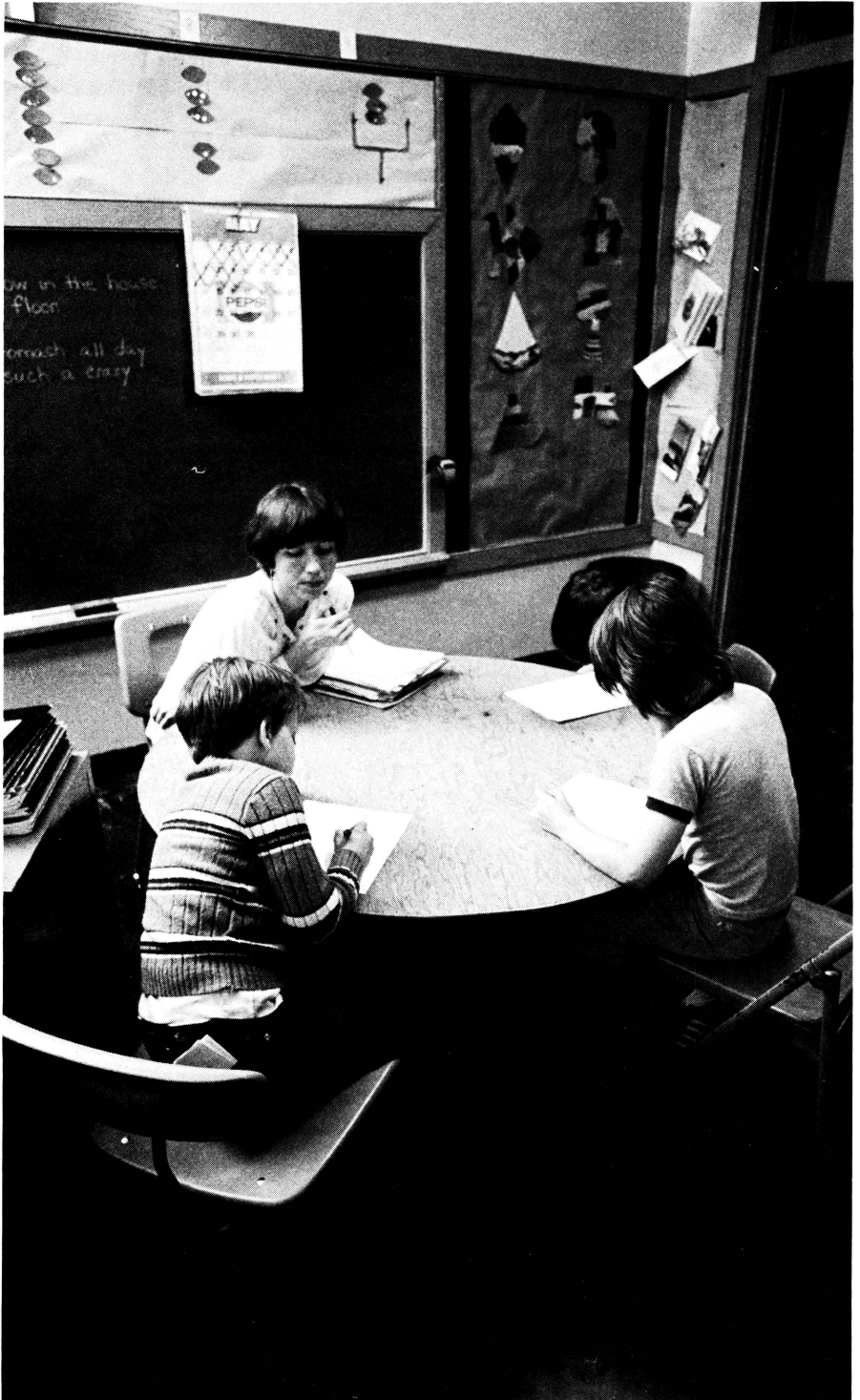
For each of the following points concerning reading comprehension, a statement is made and then some suggestions for the teacher are given.

Children are effective users of language before they begin to read.

- Children come to school with various levels of language development. Accept the student and his/her current language, building on the abilities already present.
- Build concepts before reading instruction begins through class discussions, encouraging the use of related vocabulary in appropriate contexts.
- Encourage students to question, discuss and express their own ideas and thoughts about the material being read.
- Use language experience at all levels of reading instruction. This activity builds on the concept of reading as a language process and emphasizes the importance of each individual's background of experiences and feelings.
- Read to students every day from a variety of materials which are of interest to them but may be written at levels which are too difficult for them to read. Include readings from poetry, short stories, newspaper articles as well as books.

The teacher's attitude concerning comprehension is vitally important to an effective reading program.

- Evaluate your own personal definition of comprehension in terms of teaching goals and objectives, including the use of appropriate instructional materials.
- Respect the value of each student's competencies, ideas and opinions even though they may differ from what you believe.
- When discussing responses from students, give them the opportunity to explain and defend their answers and opinions.
- Provide for individual interests and abilities by having a large classroom library composed of books, magazines, newspapers, records and filmstrips. The class can help with the selection of materials. The library should be changed as new interests and needs develop.
- Be flexible in grouping students. Groups can be formed to meet the needs of a group of students or to develop a shared interest. Groups should change as needs and interests change.



Comprehension is only possible when there is a meaningful interaction between the reader and the author.

- The classroom teacher might want to consider the following points when selecting appropriate reading material:
 - Is the reading material interesting to the student?
 - Is the author's language familiar to the student?
 - Does the student know something about what he/she is reading based on previous reading or experience?
- Set aside time every day for sustained silent reading. Everyone, including the teacher, reads something of his/her own choice. The teacher must be a model for this activity so that students see reading as an enjoyable process. The time allowed may be short in the beginning and lengthened as the students become involved.
- Encourage students to choose material which is interesting to them and will build upon concepts they know something about. At the same time, experience and knowledge should be expanded through encouraging students to select from more than one type of reading.
- Make the library and librarian an important part of the students' day. Help them to learn how to use the library and encourage frequent visits to both the school library and public library.

In all reading comprehension instruction children should be given the opportunity to take chances with the meaning as they understand it.

- Realizing each person gains meaning from a selection differently based on experiences, the teacher should encourage a classroom atmosphere that supports a variety of opinions and answers on a particular selection.
- Encourage children to "guess" what would fit in a reading selection. Teach the child to ask "Does it make sense?" and "Does it sound like language?"
- Ask open-ended questions that require students to think about what they have read such as "Tell me about _____," "Why do you think that?", "How did this make you feel?"
- Allow students the freedom to reject something that is not meaningful to them. All reading material is not meaningful to every student and some selections are written in language that is not natural.
- Use the *cloze* procedure with reading material in your classroom. A cloze passage is constructed by deleting words from a reading selection and then asking the reader to supply the missing words. For students who are reluctant to take chances, these words can be ones that are highly predictable (nouns, verbs,). While various methods of evaluating these answers have been developed, one which best encourages readers to strive for understanding is to accept any replacement word which is meaningful and makes sense to the individual. Readers should

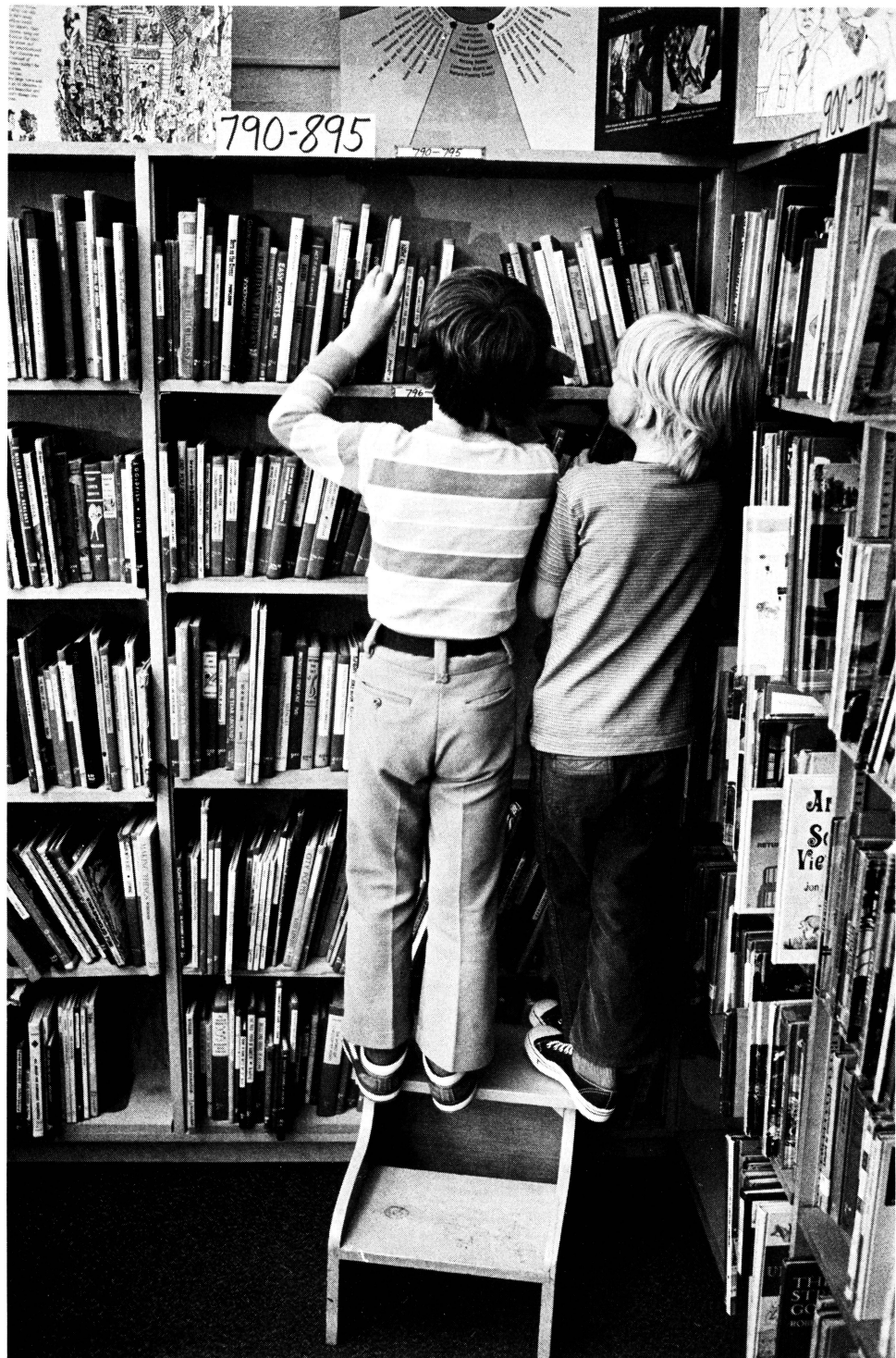


be given the opportunity to explain and discuss these responses in learning atmosphere which recognizes that sometimes there may be more than one acceptable answer.

Reading comprehension is only one aspect of language learning and thus should not be developed in isolation from the other language processes—speaking, listening and writing.

- Provide many opportunities for discussion and sharing of ideas with the entire class and in small groups. Help each student feel that he/she has something worthwhile to contribute.
- Teach students to listen to and respect the opinions and ideas of others.
- Encourage creative writing at all levels and in all subject areas. Have students share their writing with others. Read these for content; do not correct spelling, punctuation, or sentence form. Some suggestions for writing experiences are
 - Alternate endings to stories.
 - Captions for pictures or comics.
 - Writing a play based on something they have read.
 - Writing about something they have done or would like to do.
 - Writing about a science experiment.
 - Composing songs or riddles.
 - Writing recipes.
 - Writing articles for a class newspaper.

Have students read silently. In this way, they can learn to view reading as a personal and individual process. Students can read orally when they want to share something they have read with others.



About the Authors



Richard D. Robinson, professor of Education at the University of Missouri-Columbia, has a dual appointment in the departments of continuing professional education and curriculum and instruction.

He received his doctorate in reading education from the University of Georgia in 1971. Presently, he is working with school districts throughout Missouri on evaluation and implementation of reading programs.



Patricia Jenkins is a teaching assistant in reading education at the University of Missouri-Columbia. A native of Arkansas, she received her BSE and MSE degrees from Arkansas State University. Ms. Jenkins' teaching experience includes public school teaching at all levels; elementary, secondary, remedial reading, learning disabilities, and resource room.

The old expression that “we can’t see the forest for the trees” is applicable in many areas—even in teaching reading. Or, put another way, it is possible for us to become so concerned with *means* that they become *ends* without our recognizing that it has happened.

Language is many things—simple and complex, objective and subjective, personal and corporate, specific and general, and much more.

In the final analysis, meanings are in people. At best our attempts to convey what is in our minds to others is only approximate, either in oral or written form, and our attempts to discover the meaning of others from the written or spoken word is equally approximate. However, increasing experience with the language, and systematic instruction devoted to translation of meaning can increase precision in interpretation of the written word and decrease the probability of misunderstanding and error.

This monograph deals with the importance of meaning as an end in reading and explores the ways in which this end can become enhanced. Careful attention to the information provided will add a good deal of perspective to the teachers’ teaching of reading.

Charles H. Koelling
Assistant Dean
College of Education

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