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BASIC ISSUES IN AMERICAN READING INSTRUCTION

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The teaching of reading to pre-school children has become increasingly common in recent years. Kindergarten schools, too, are engaging in more formal teaching than heretofore. As yet, however, there is no clear evidence concerning the long term effects of these practices. The study of teaching reading in the first grade of the elementary school shows that the teacher is probably more important than factors such as the method and materials used. The teaching of reading to disadvantaged children, to secondary school students and to illiterate adolescents and adults raises many problems that have not as yet been adequately faced.

There are a number of issues raised by teachers, parents and the press concerning reading instruction in the public schools of America. Psychologists, optometrists, curriculum generalists and reading specialists all have something to say about the manner in which reading should be taught. The issues are myriad. Only six will be considered here, and these have been selected because they seem to be most important and pertinent to the development of a sound reading programme. They are:

1. Teaching the pre-school or nursery school child to read
2. The role of the kindergarten in the reading programme
3. Methods and materials for first grade instruction
4. Teaching disadvantaged children to read
5. Teaching students to read in the secondary schools
6. The role of the school in teaching illiterate adolescents and adults to read.

TEACHING THE PRE-SCHOOL OR NURSERY SCHOOL CHILD TO READ

For almost a century it was customary to begin the teaching of reading when children entered the first grade. Usually the child was six years of age, and fifty per cent of children had attended a kindergarten designed for the education of the four- and five-year-old child. A few children had attended nursery school. These were either the children of the *élite* or the children of the very poor who, because their parents worked, were housed in welfare-sponsored day-care centres. While some reading instruction did

go on at the pre-six-year-old level it was random in nature, not publicized, and usually provided for the very bright three, four or five-year-old child.

In the last dozen years, however, the *laissez-faire* attitude concerning the formal education of the very young has given way to a much more academic approach. There is now a considerable number of documented experiments and demonstrations which suggest that the very young can be taught to read, that some learn on their own, and the suggestion has been made that young children should be taught to read long before they reach the age of six. The principal and most publicized advocates of early reading are Doman (7), Dolores Durkin (8), Omar K. Moore (12), Nancy M. Rambusch (13) and a number of researchers in Denver Public Schools. The reports of some people working with disadvantaged pre-school pupils also suggest that educators are eager to use formal means of opening up the minds of the disadvantaged pre-school child (2).

The most startling publication related to teaching the very young was undoubtedly that of Glen Doman (7). Doman suggests that the easiest time to begin reading is two years of age; however, if one is prepared to go to a little trouble, one can begin at eighteen months, or even as early as ten months of age.

Durkin has written a number of articles and has recently produced a book about a limited group of children who learned to read before entering school. From findings based on the study of a group of 49 children and a replication of the study, Durkin has encouraged the idea that because a number of children have learned to read on their own, revisions need to be made in the curriculum provided for young children in the first days in school. At the conclusion of a carefully-written summary of her findings Durkin asks: 'What is the function of the total kindergarten programme in the 1960s? It is both safe and sensible to assume that different communities will find different answers to this most fundamental of questions. It is probably safe to assume, too, that some of the answers will include help with reading for some five-year-olds. If this is the case, it is the sincere hope of this writer that findings from these two studies of early readers will provide at least a small amount of guidance in making decisions about what is appropriate help for five-year-old children who are ready to read' (8, p. 139).

The work of O. K. Moore received a great deal of attention in the 1950s due in the main to a dramatic presentation of his experiments through films entitled *Early Reading and Writing*. The film pictured Dr Moore and several associates instructing two and three-year-old children in reading and writing using an electric typewriter, a tachistoscope and an ordinary chalkboard. Following his first relatively crude experiment, Dr Moore, in co-operation with the Edison Laboratories, developed the

Responsive Environment, a booth which presents visual and auditory stimuli through an electric typewriter and a taped programme providing very young children with direct instruction in reading and writing. The *RE* has been established in several schools and in at least one hospital, and is used for early instruction, or what is coming to be called intervention—a term particularly related to efforts to provide for the language needs of disadvantaged children. In June 1966 Moore announced that his *Responsive Environments*' equipment will be used in Chicago to provide disadvantaged pre-schoolers with basic intellectual skills.

Nancy M. Rambusch (13) presented an American approach to Montessori in the book *Learning how to learn.* Mrs Rambusch's book described the methods of teaching originally developed by Madame Montessori as they are used with three-year-olds and other children in private schools such as that in Whitby, Connecticut. Mrs Rambusch discussed not only what is taking place at Whitby but depicted her ideal school of the next decade, a school 'in which the arbitrary distinctions of pre-school versus "real" school have disappeared, one in which children from age three until age eight are thought of as being in the first phase of learning'. Special teachers would be available at specific times to help children in the first group to acquire the skills of reading, writing and mathematics as the academic portion of their learning. One received the impression from the Rambusch book that the pursuit of reading and writing is encouraged by the environment and facilitated by direct instruction after children have tried to learn to read and write themselves.

In recent years more than 150 nursery-type Montessori schools have developed. The Montessori movement is finding a reception on the fringes of American public and private education. However, the impact of formal instruction on three, four and five-year-olds in private nursery schools will have an influence on education in both private and public kindergartens which could lead to a formal structuring of kindergarten programmes. It will be virtually impossible for kindergarten teachers to argue against teaching formal reading in their classes if parents have already sent their children to Montessori schools where reading and writing is often taught to three and four-year-olds.

While the work of Moore and the demonstrations of the Montessori schools will have some effect on the curriculum for young children the effect will cause scarcely a ripple compared with the reaction to the efforts of the authorities in the Denver Public Schools. Mention in newspapers and magazines and a few rumours were the first heralds of the demonstration conducted by the Denver Public Schools. During the early years of the work in Denver only two authoritative statements of the demonstration were found. However, the publication *Preparing your child for*

reading, a guide for parents used in the project, was available. This booklet is aimed at guiding parents in helping their children to become 'independent readers' as soon as possible. It contains a series of sixteen lessons designed to prepare children for reading. The lessons are somewhat similar to those found in the typical first books of a basic reading series or in workbooks which present exclusive phonic lessons. They focus on those pre-reading steps which help children to discriminate among sounds, relate sounds to letters, and utilize a combination of initial letter sounds and context to supply words in sentences. The material is learned through a series of well-planned lessons which involve a friendly co-operation between parent and child. Some lessons require the addition of a neighbour's child, such as the one learned through the game 'Giant Steps'.

Today the Denver programme has been widely publicized both through articles written by the Denver staff and through commercial interests. The cinescopes which served to guide parents in teaching their pre-school children to read are now shown by Educational TV stations. The Denver Schools continued their early instruction into the schools and can now report experimental evidence which shows the advantages of early instruction (4, 15). Other schools have adopted the Denver approach and articles describing their programmes have appeared in educational journals (10).

There is no basis for quarrelling with the simple steps which are presented in *Preparing your child for reading*. One shudders, however, at what could happen when thousands of eager parents, guided by television lessons and using this booklet, launch an attack on their young children. The idea that parents should co-operate with their own children in such a venture is not unreasonable. However, there are grounds for concern about what may happen when relatively untutored parents begin to press very young children in the formal routine presented in this programme.

The long-term effect of the Denver and similar experiments and demonstrations will be hard to measure. The magnitude and apparent success of the programme will affect many parents and will encourage them not only to teach their pre-school children to read but will undoubtedly cause them to put pressure on the schools to teach reading to the very young in kindergarten. It is apparent that for the next decade at least we will observe many programmes of pre-school reading instruction conducted by parents or in nursery schools. The overall effect of these programmes on children will probably never be evaluated. However, it is clear that if schools want to maintain an unstructured kindergarten with a minimum of formal instruction, educators will have to be persuasive indeed.

THE ROLE OF THE KINDERGARTEN IN THE READING PROGRAMME

For more than a hundred years the kindergarten in American schools has served as a non-academic, unstructured, informal year aiding the child to make the transition from a home where he often ruled as the centre of attention, with few responsibilities, to a first grade programme relatively heavy in broad social and scholastic demands. During the 1950s, surveys of schools in New York State conducted by the staff of the Syracuse University Reading and Language Arts Centre, revealed a definite shift in the kindergarten programme from informality to formality, from unstructured to structured programmes and from an emphasis on the social and emotional growth of individuals to a rather rigid academic approach to the teaching of readiness for reading and actual reading instruction (1).

Formal reading instruction in Russia does not begin until children are seven. During the kindergarten year children are taught to classify, discriminate, compare and designate what they see in proper language and through discussion (11). The curriculum includes drawing, construction and general language development. It is not suggested that the teaching of reading and writing should begin in the kindergarten; rather it is seen as growing out of the language development programme of the kindergarten which features oral and pre-book learning. The Russians look upon the kindergarten year as a time of informal learning. Indeed the reported Soviet kindergarten resembles the relatively unstructured programme for five-year-olds which has been traditional in American schools for many years.

In Sweden children start school a year or more later than children in the United States and Britain. Swedish educators feel that both psychological research and pedagogical experience suggest that it is a great advantage for children to start school as late as seven. Many Swedish psychologists and teachers feel that the late beginning age is one of the important reasons why comparatively so few children have reading disabilities in the elementary schools of Sweden.

Children who learn to read and write at a very early age, either on their own or with some slight guidance from others, are present in almost every school in the United States. The survey made by Durkin (8) in Oakland, California, could probably be replicated with similar results in almost any community. Durkin found a number of boys and girls who had begun to read before entering school. During the past year the writer has observed children in a number of schools on Long Island who entered the kindergarten able to identify words and, in several cases, able to read simple material in a more or less competent fashion. There is

little or no proof, however, that these children maintain their initial advantage when compared, at a later age, with children of similar ability.

The important point to consider is whether or not the kindergarten should abandon its traditional unstructured programme and become a first grade in terms of learning activities. Psychologists and educators in general will have contradictory things to say about the effect of introducing reading and writing to four and five-year-olds. One can read research reports and not be entirely convinced one way or the other. The best single procedure might be to visit a number of kindergartens and observe the reactions of boys and girls in structured and unstructured classes. A further step might include the testing of randomly selected pupils from both groups and the comparison of differences in reading ability at the end of first and second grades. A subtle factor which escapes immediate detection in this kind of comparative study is the interest of children in reading at a later date. This observer has seen tension and strain in the kindergarten where reading instruction has been carried on. Whether this tension maintains over the years is a moot question.

There is no clear-cut evidence then concerning the value or harm done by teaching children to read in the kindergarten instead of in the first grade. We know that children can be taught to read at five. Our concern is whether or not the advantage of early learning persists and therefore makes the strain and struggle worthwhile, and whether interest in later reading is increased or diminished by the earlier introduction of a disciplined approach to learning.

METHODS AND MATERIALS IN FIRST GRADE READING INSTRUCTION

In 1959 reading specialists from all parts of the U.S. gathered at Syracuse University to discuss needed research in reading. As a result of three days of discussion it was decided that the area of reading instruction in greatest need of research was the first grade. From 1959 to 1963 a committee sought funds to carry on a co-ordinated national research study of first grade reading. In 1964 the United States Office of Education awarded $30,000 to each of 27 research centres to carry on the proposed study. Eleven widely different methods, represented by a variety of materials, were tested in some 500 classrooms of first-grade children during 1964-1965. Among the procedures and materials used were the language-experience approach, a variety of standard basal reading series, an italicized basal version invented by Ed Fry of Rutgers University, the i.t.a., several linguistic approaches and a variety of phonics programmes. Summary reports of 20 of the studies published in the May 1966 issue of the *Reading Teacher* and seven reports in the October 1966 *Reading Teacher* revealed

by and large that methods and materials were not the crucial elements in teaching first-grade children to read. Such variables as teachers, the intelligence of children, socio-economic status of pupils all seemed more crucial than methodology or materials. In fact, this researcher concluded that the most important single factor in developing a successful first-grade reading programme is the teacher. This is not a novel idea by any means.

The full impact of the first grade experiment has not yet been measured and it is likely that much of the possible value of the study will not be realized because of a lack of follow-up. While thirteen of the research centres did follow their populations through the second grade, only a few are currently studying the continuing effects on third grade pupils.

However, the studies already have had good effects. They have, for example, resulted in encouraging the participants to evaluate new methods and materials quite carefully before launching into their use, and in the schools in which our own studies were made, teachers and administrators learned to appreciate the importance of many variables (e.g. socio-economic background) frequently overlooked in teaching reading. The continued presence of supervisors was also a help to teachers in seeking solutions to specific questions and eliminated that feeling of frustration that comes when teachers feel left alone and ignored by the rest of the school.

The few research teams that have continued to evaluate boys and girls in the initial first grade study should be able to present interesting findings in the next few years which might suggest advantages of this method or that material not discovered after one year of study. Positive and negative results on continued learning might be observed as the longitudinal studies are made. We are interested, for example, in following the boys who, contrary to usual results, were not less competent in reading than comparable girls after one year. Will these boys maintain or lose their equal status as the years go by? The answer to this and other questions will add to our insight about reading.

TEACHING DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN TO READ

Today we are beginning to hear varied opinions as to the best procedures for teaching the disadvantaged child to read. Some advocates of early intervention seem to suggest that we need not only to fill in the neglected areas in language development of very young disadvantaged children, but that direct instruction in reading and writing might help the young to compete on more even terms with their advantaged classmates in the primary grades. One Negro sociologist is not as concerned with the accomplishments of centre-city Negro children in the primary grades as

he is with the gradual loss of comparative status of disadvantaged Negro children in the middle grades and junior high school (6).

The matter of *de facto* segregation enters the argument on two levels. Some feel that the disadvantaged child can learn better if he is transported out of his limited milieu to schools with predominantly advantaged pupils. Others feel that the disadvantaged realize their inadequacies even more sharply and react negatively when placed in a classroom with advantaged children. The matter of grouping becomes important particularly if, in ungraded primary classes or classes grouped homogeneously on the basis of reading skills, the disadvantaged gradually slip to the lowest level group for instruction.

An interesting issue is that of the kind of textbooks and the linguistic patterns that provide most adequately for either the centre-city child or the rural disadvantaged child. Most teachers are aware of the debate over the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) textbooks with their predominance of illustrations taken from one aspect of American life. They are also aware of the recent statements by some linguists who suggest that reading material should reflect the speech patterns of the children for whom they are intended.

At the present time there is no easy solution nor no widely accepted resolution of the issue of how the disadvantaged child, Negro or white, city or rural, can be best instructed. We look for answers which might come from such conferences as that reported by Bloom and others in the volume *Compensatory education for cultural deprivation* (3). We are also waiting for reports on the programmes now carried on in New York City, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Detroit, West Virginia and in many other places. We feel hopeful that in time we can find solutions to the problem of educating the disadvantaged children of the U.S. At the present time, however, solutions are far outnumbered by the problems.

TEACHING STUDENTS TO READ IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS

The debate as to why it is necessary to teach reading in the secondary schools, who should do the teaching and at what point it can be assumed that reading instruction is no longer necessary is vigorous but yields little helpful guidance today.

In a few research centres in the United States work is being carried on to determine what the secondary pupil needs in the way of reading instruction and how he can best be taught. Sheldon, Early and Herber, working at Syracuse University in a Project English Centre sponsored by the U.S. Office of Education, have created a series of 10 films in a junior and senior high school setting which demonstrates the full scope of the

reading problem in the secondary school. The films and related manuals suggest that developmental reading instruction needs to be carried on by reading specialists during the junior high school years, that corrective and remedial reading instruction is called for throughout the secondary school for some students, and that teachers of the content areas must teach the reading of their subject to guarantee its mastery.

The goals of secondary reading instruction have been well stated by Robert B. Heilman:

> The graduating senior high school student should be one who has been trained in planning his own reading activities and one who has acquired effective study habits so that he can continue to use reading to learn. He should have become able to use reading as a guide and aid to creative endeavour so that he can lead a full, active life. He should be able to read thoughtfully and make critical judgments about what is read so that he may appraise the validity of the author's point of view and the accuracy of his statements. The high-school reading programme should develop readers who can and will read for pleasure, information and continued growth in their chosen occupations and in their social understandings (9).

Whether or not a viable programme of reading instruction will be developed in the secondary school is debatable. It is obvious to observers, however, that unless the curriculum includes such instruction the number of semi-literate and illiterate adolescents leaving high school will continue to increase and, in a highly technical world, will need to be maintained by their more literate peers.

THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL IN TEACHING ILLITERATE ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS TO READ

It has been estimated that there are more than eleven million male adolescent and adult illiterates in the United States. It has also been estimated that five hundred thousand semi-literate and illiterate individuals leave school each year.

In spite of the enormous proportions of the problem of illiteracy, no real action to reduce illiteracy has been taken by the schools of America. While educators are trying to determine which agency or agencies have the major responsibility for teaching the illiterate, all sorts of public spirited groups, including organisations and Churches, are attempting to deal with illiterates in specific communities. The U.S. Government's

efforts are getting under way through the Department of Labour, the Office of Economic Opportunity and the United States Office of Education.

Adult educators have been concerned mainly with the instruction of those in need of continuing education—not basic literacy. It seems apparent that American educators have not been prepared to assume a role in educating the illiterates living in each school district. However, it is expected that through governmental pressure and the interest of industry and individuals, the schools will soon have an opportunity to choose whether they or some other agency to be created will have the task of irradicating the blight of illiteracy from the American scene.

As the reader can see the current issues in American reading instruction range from infants to adults and require a 'cradle to the grave' effort before America can realize the dream that through reading all can find their own way to freedom.

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