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# Some Issues in the Teaching of Reading

by A. Sterl Artley

(The following article is a summary of the remarks of the author at the Michigan Reading Association conference in Grand Rapids on April 4, 1967)

When we speak of issues, we mean that there are various sides to some particular question. There are pros and cons, so anybody who talks about issues must state an opinion which is quite personal. And so, both figuratively and literally, I'll be looking through my own glasses at these issues that I'd like to discuss with you.

## Early Reading

The first one is the early introduction of reading. This is an issue which is now engaging the attention of many kindergarten teachers and other primary level teachers. It has to do with the age at which reading instruction should be introduced. Triggered by the studies of Moore and the teaching of two and three year olds, further interest has been created through the investigations of Durkin into the reading of children prior to grade one, the Denver study of the effect of developing readiness in the home by parents with instruction through TV, the Taylor study of the reading of Scottish children, and the re-examination of some of the earlier studies

dealing with the reading ability of precocious children. This issue has become a very, very live one.

Fundamentally, there are two issues: the first is whether reading can be taught to children younger than the age at which they enter first grade. The second is whether reading should be taught to these young children. With respect to the first issue, there seems to be little basis for argument; for evidence seems to be available that at least some type of reading may be taught to some kinds of children by some particular approach at a very early age. For example, Moore has shown that through the use of a rather complicated process involving a typewriter, a projector, a chalkboard, a tape recorder, and a teacher, even a two year old can be taught to engage in some type of activity that he calls reading.

Twenty years ago, Hollingworth, writing about children with higher than average intelligence, described a group of children who learned to read at the age of three. Arthur Gates



reported in 1937, as a result of some of his early studies of reading readiness, that by modifying instruction and materials children with a mental age of five could be taught to read in group situations. Consequently, there seems to be little doubt over the question of whether children younger than the conventional age at first grade entrance can learn to read, at least in some manner described by the researcher.

The answer to the second question is at present much more obscure. Only through a carefully designed longitudinal study of experimental and control groups with respect to achievement in reading as well as visual problems, personal adjustment, emotional well-being, and general school progress at a series of grades later than the first will we have an answer to this question. And of course by this time a generation of youngsters will have gone through the mill, for good or bad. Furthermore, any analysis of the question of whether children should be taught reading at an early age must rest upon what we mean by reading.

Though it is difficult to determine from an analysis of the studies precisely how the several reporters defined the reading process, a between-the-lines analysis seems to be that most of them are thinking of reading largely as a process of saying the words.

It would not require an observation of a child's performance on an electric typewriter to indicate that some children at the age of two, for example, could learn to identify letters and words. Children who have played with alphabet blocks have done this for years. Certainly the letters could be combined into simple sentences, and, in terms of one concept, the child would be reading.

If, on the other hand, learning to read is a complex symbolic process, not unlike that of acquiring a second language, then the process should await a more mature stage of development. A survey of the recent literature dealing with this issue indicates that this latter belief seems to be the more feasible one. Teachers know that undue pressure on children may result in confusion, frustration, and non-learning.

Sheldon, in a recent article, summarizes the research on the early introduction of reading and concludes: "From the research which is pertinent from studies and observations of five year olds in a learning situation, and from the evidence of the later effects of early learning, there seems to be little or no justification for introducing reading into the curriculum at the kindergarten or the five year old stage." One should hasten to add, as does Sheldon in the article referred to, that any recommen-



dation made with the advisability of initiating reading instruction on the kindergarten level does not preclude a strong kindergarten program that is designed to develop certain aspects of reading readiness. These would include oral language facility, concept development, visual and auditory discrimination, picture interpretation, and the like.

However, any statement made with regard to the age or grade at which reading should be initiated must not overlook what we have learned about individual differences. For some children, only readiness activities of the most gross nature should be undertaken in kindergarten, with refinement in grade one, and reading instruction postponed until the end of grade one or the beginning of the second grade.

At the other end of the distribution are those few children, as Durkin and others have found, who are already reading, or who might actually begin reading instruction on the kindergarten level. Both Durkin and Nila B. Smith have pointed out that if we really believe in individual differences, the end of the kindergarten year might see the introduction of reading for a few children. There is some danger in making this statement, however, and I would want to make it clear that we are talking about reading instruction in kindergarten for those few children who are ready, and not for

all kindergarten youngsters.

i/t/a

Another issue is the initial teaching alphabet, or i/t/a. Though possibly not at the point of being a controversial issue, there certainly is a great deal of interest in the use of the initial teaching alphabet in the early stages of reading instruction. Possibly, if people refrained from making premature judgements about it and wait for some objective data, an issue may not develop. I'm sure you are all familiar with the 44 character synthetic alphabet of i/t/a, so we need not go into its development.

The reports coming out of England where the alphabet has been in use, I believe for four or five years, and from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, particularly where the Mazurkiewicz materials have been in use for some time, show results quite strikingly in favor of the alphabet. One does find, however, that Mr. Downing, who is directing research in England, is much more guarded in his claims for it than are the American promoters. Frankly, as of this time, I feel we haven't sufficient valid research where all the variables are rigidly controlled to give us a definite answer about the value of this teaching medium with young children.

The majority of the current reports, particularly those from the United States, are so saturated with the Hawthorne effect that one is unable to say whether the results are due to the



enthusiasm for the new procedure, the materials, the method, the medium, or the amount of time the teacher is spending on it. Possibly you've heard Donald Durrell say, "Give us five years, and this will pass into oblivion the same as a lot of other things have done." I don't know--it may be, and it may not.

As Mr. Downing has pointed out, i/t/a is only a teaching medium, not a method. This being true, it is a means of stimulating early word perception, different only in form from any one of the other 27, more or less, types of phonics programs on the market today. If, through suitable content and method i/t/a becomes a part of a reading program that makes provision for all aspects of reading growth, including comprehension and critical reading, it might have a real contribution to make to reading instruction. However, we need to know whether children who, through i/t/a, can pronounce more words at the end of grade one, can read on a more mature level at the ends of grades four and six, and whether they can spell better or write better paragraphs. These things will need to come from research.

### **Self-Help Kits**

In the last few years several self-help kits, laboratories, and so forth, have appeared on the scene. Usually these materials come boxed, and allow for self-evaluation, self-scoring, self-recording, and, if one were to believe the promotional ma-

terial, self-teaching. It would be desired that reading, like the building of a bird house or a model plane, could be self-taught. But unfortunately, reading is a complex ability, and, as such, teaching reading requires a teacher, whether at the grade three level or the grade ten level. I say this with the full knowledge of the testimonials of the satisfied users and some research recorded in the literature that indicates their value.

From observation I am distressed by what I see: students where the initial interest has died out, and where, in a perfunctory manner, they read a story, take a test, record the results, read a story, take a test, record the results, and then repeat it and repeat it.

Because these materials have a content that is, for the most part, carefully selected and graded in difficulty, it appears that they would have valid use as supplements to a reading program, carried out by an experienced, knowledgeable teacher, who is constantly alert to the successes and problems of individual children. Even then one might wish to compare the cost of these materials with some library books.

### **Machines and Devices**

Also there have appeared in the last fifteen years or so a great number of devices and machines designed for the purpose of teaching certain aspects of reading. Among these materials are films, slides, tapes tachistoscopes, rate pacers, and



records. Time does not permit an extensive evaluation of each of these devices. Spache gives a most comprehensive discussion of these materials, and I'm referring here to his Chapter 12 in the Sixtieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, on auditory and visual materials. This is an excellent summary; the reader is directed to this chapter for full coverage. I would, however, like to refer briefly to two of them: the first are the visual and auditory aids in the way of films, slides, and filmstrips designed to develop an experiential background for a particular story or for a unit of work. Concepts and understandings difficult to develop through reading can be clarified through sound and pictured action of tape and film. Since in many cases the child has no way of putting a foundation of meaning under his reading through direct experiences, these devices are admirably suited as a second best, and we would highly approve of them.

The second group is made up of a variety of mechanical contrivances, such as reading pacers, rapid exposure devices, and the like, serving chiefly to increase visual perception and reading speed. In some cases, it is questionable whether the facility developed in this manner has any transfer value to the actual process of reading. In other cases, though the use of the device may result in an increase in speed of compre-

hension, its value chiefly is that of motivation, and in many instances results could be secured much more functionally, cheaper, and as effectively with the use of a stop-watch. I am certain that this statement divulges the fact that I am not instrument oriented.

To me, nothing will take the place of the teacher-pupil relationship. In the words of Dr. Spache, "There is no available evidence to our knowledge that any audio-visual aid or training device has ever taught an individual to read more critically or discriminately. Audio-visual instruments cannot supply the stimulation of group discussion or the individualization essential in remedial teaching." In a word, no satisfactory mechanical substitute for a competent teacher has been devised.

#### **Programmed Materials**

It is interesting to note that teaching machines and programmed instruction were not mentioned in the Sixtieth Yearbook of the National Society of Education. Only since this yearbook was published have programmed materials been developed and tried out. Consequently, many questions are being raised in regard to their use. Beginning to appear in the literature are many well-written articles giving a very critical review and evaluation of these materials: some of the writers are very reserved in their comments in respect to the potential values of the programmed materials, while oth-



ers are even critical of the very premises upon which the idea of programming rests.

Frankly, as of this time, we haven't sufficient research evidence available to enable one to form a valid judgement about their use. Regardless of how enthusiastic the theorists and the promoters may be concerning them, their ultimate value will be determined on the basis of carefully controlled studies in classroom situations over a period of time after the initial enthusiasm has worn off. About the best I can do, then, is to make some tentative judgements that may or may not be supported eventually by research.

First, it seems unlikely that programmed materials will supplant the materials now being used for reading instruction, especially if we believe that a story or article should be presented in the form of continuous discourse rather than in discrete bits, and if we think that illustrations and attractive format have motivational value. As far as the child or the adolescent is concerned, the motivation for reading is enjoying a good story or securing information which he needs. It is not to practice skills, to see how much he can recall, or to learn long or short vowels. These may be the teacher's purposes, in part, but not the pupil's.

Furthermore, if we believe that the reading act involves the reader's critical or emotion-

al reaction, where right and wrong answers are less apparent, then the highly structured content and forced responses of programmed materials will have little use. Perhaps, then, this might give us a clue to the major value of programmed materials as we see it: where the goal is one of giving instruction and practice in particular skill areas, programmed materials may be very useful in supplying the necessary instruction.

Future research in the use of programmed instruction, it seems to me, will be most fruitful if it is directed toward finding out what part of the reading program can be handled most expeditiously through programmed materials and how they may be combined with the more conventional approach to effect an improvement over what we are now doing.

### Elementary Libraries

The next is hardly an issue, but I want to refer to it. I would feel remiss in my responsibilities in discussing the elementary school reading program and the issues, were I not to ask you to take a good, unbiased, objective look at your own elementary school library. Let me tell you what I have found: a lush elementary school, two years old, with a fine gym floor and excellent basketball equipment, but with an unimpressive room with metal shelving around the sides, a few tables too tall for young



children, and at the most 200 copies of worn out books and several sets of antiquated encyclopedias. This, the principal said, was their elementary school library.

It has been reported that in 60 percent of the nation's elementary schools attended by ten million children there are no school libraries. Today, Boston's public elementary schools serving more than 55,000 children have no libraries at all. In ten of our largest cities, including Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit, New York, and St. Louis, elementary school libraries are either standard or non-existent. A national disgrace, the condition has been called.

Much of this, I feel, is the result of the principal failing to see the reading program in any other terms than workbooks, supplementary phonics materials, reading tests, and basal readers. Those skills are important, and no one would deny it, but they are only the means to the end. The end is the use of reading for enjoyment and information. And basal readers, as important as they are to sequential reading growth, are never assumed to be the whole of a sound reading program.

If children are to grow through reading; if we are concerned with the products of reading in the way of values, insights, understandings, attitudes, and patterns of conduct, it becomes apparent that materials must be available and in

abundance to nurture this kind of growth.

Of course, you will recognize that I am trying to make a very strong plea for a program of personal reading, where through well-written materials of the type to which I am referring, children and young adolescents may live vicariously, and where, through close identification and reaction with others they can absorb the values that society considers important and take them on as their own.

Where can children experience the therapy of laughter and compassion better than in **Charlotte's Web**? Or feel the security of close family ties than in **The Little House in the Big Woods**? Or experience the satisfaction of overcoming personal problems and physical handicaps better than in **The Door in the Wall**? In this last story, you recall Brother Luke's admonition to the little crippled boy: "Thou hast only to follow the wall far enough, and someplace there will be a door in it." This might be for many the basis for encouragement and hope.

But when we talk about a program of personal reading for young people, one thing becomes apparent: the need for more, better equipped, and professionally staffed school libraries. And they do cost money! The standards for school libraries, prepared by the American



Association of School Librarians are high.

For elementary libraries the recommendation is that the minimum size of the collection in schools from 200 to 1,000 pupils should be from 6,000 to 10,000 books. Moreover, the library should be staffed by a full-time, trained children's librarian. No longer can we afford the questionable economy of a basement room with cast-offs from the house cleaning in the fall or from the school board's allotment to the library fund after everything else has been purchased. The library must not be in competition with the football team or the school band for funds. Books and magazines are needed, desperately needed, as basic equipment.

### Phonics

Now the last is our good old friend, phonics. Certainly anyone who assumes the task of talking about issues would be expected to include phonics as one. It is one of the most emotionally tinged, even after twenty years. This I shall attempt to do; however, I am not so presumptuous as to assume that I can resolve it this afternoon.

The controversy over phonics, as Dr. Nila B. Smith has so frequently pointed out, is virtually as old as American reading instruction itself. Like the waves of the ocean it has its crests and troughs of popularity and unpopularity. Presumably, the issue will continue until the process of evolution equips fu-

ture generations with bulbous eyes for TV viewing, and reading as we know it now will be relegated to limbo.

Since this field has been so thoroughly plowed and harrowed in the past, little today can be gained by harrowing it again. Permit me then to make just a few observations.

First, the issue is not what many people, especially the journalists and the lay readers, think it is. The issue is not one of two opposed points of view about the way reading should be taught: phonics versus look-say. Few today believe that reading can be taught by a visual method. It would be an impossible task to learn each word as a visual entity. If this method is practiced by an isolated teacher in an isolated school, it is being done in violation of what she would find in any text on reading methods, and certainly opposed to the suggested methods and procedures found in any guidebook for the teaching of reading.

On the surface, the issue is over the question of whether the sounds of the letters and letter combinations should be taught deductively, before the actual reading process is initiated, or whether the sounds of the spoken language should be associated with their printed counterparts as an inductive process by generalizing them as sound patterns from an initial stock of sight words which possess certain characteristics.

But the real issue is not over the time at which phonics



should be taught, but over the nature of the reading process itself: simplicity or complexity. Is reading a simple process of translating printed symbols into their spoken counterparts, with such factors as comprehension, critical and emotional reactions, albeit important, only an adjunct to the "real" process of reading? Or is reading a process of creating meaning with word perception a means to that end? Is it a process of perceiving words, or a process of learning the intricacies of a language? It is on this front, it seems to me, that the issue must be resolved.

But why hasn't research given us an answer to these questions? Surely the area of phonics has not been neglected. On the contrary, in fact it does provide an answer: any answer you want. Take any position you wish, and you will find research evidence to substantiate it. There is hardly any area of research that would cause one to suspect the whole field of educational research as that dealing with phonics. Much of it is research in quotes: testimonials of practitioners. Some of it is very poorly designed: an experimental group is compared with a control group using what they call a traditional approach, whatever that is. Here the Hawthorne effect is a factor seldom considered. In other cases, inadequate measures of reading achievement have been used, results have

been assumed too soon, or the studies have been based on conditions and materials in use a quarter of a century ago. Frankly I think this issue has to be settled philosophically and psychologically. What do we want a reading program to do? What is the psychological process of learning? Particularly the psychological process of learning to read? After these questions are settled, the questions dealing with the how and when of word perception in general and phonics in particular will be more readily resolved.

And finally, a special plea: let's stop spinning our wheels over phonics! And spinning our wheels over several of these other issues, too. Let's get on to some of the really big problems that confront us. Such questions as the importance and financing of elementary libraries; the matter of critical reading--the factors that condition it and ways of developing it; propaganda analysis; types of reading attitudes and competencies to be developed on the secondary level; ways of differentiating instruction so that the needs of all, from the brightest to the slowest, will be adequately provided for. These are examples to which we should be directing our time, our effort, and our research ability.

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