

HISTORY OF READING NEWS

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HOW SHALL WE TEACH READING?

by Kathy Carr

NOTES TAKEN IN 1969 AT THE IRA CONFERENCE IN KANSAS CITY

Editors' Note: Kathy Carr is Professor of Reading and Director of the Literacy Center at Central Missouri State University, Warrensburg. Early in her career, she had the privilege of attending the 1969 IRA Convention held in Kansas City. At the convention she made meticulous notes as she attended various sessions. Upon her return, she wrote the following memo to her colleagues outlining the highlights of the convention as she viewed them. Carr has shared these notes with us and, with her permission, we share them, in their unedited state, with our membership. This is an interesting window onto an IRA Convention viewed from three decades away. Present readers will recognize many of the names as important IRA members and leaders in the field of literacy education who have made a lasting impact on our discipline and organization.

A NOTE TO TEACHERS

This is the only "how to" hand out on reading that I have written this year. I hope that you will take time to read it, if not now, before school starts next fall.

I have just returned from the International Reading Association Convention in Kansas City where I was privileged to hear addresses by such notables in the field of reading as Albert J. Harris, N. Y. U., John Downing, University of London, Arthur I. Gates, Columbia University, Arthur Heilman, Penn State, A. Sterl Artley, University of Missouri, and Nila Banton Smith, University of Southern California.

The IRA has 22,000 members mostly elementary teachers who are interested in the teaching of reading. Of course, many college professors, reading specialists and principals belong. There are 750 local and state councils or chapters. The council for our area meets at the Student Union in Pittsburgh four times a year. I know you would enjoy this organization.

HOW SHALL WE TEACH READING?

The main issue at the 1969 IRA Convention seemed to be "How shall we teach reading?" Do we start with phonics or

sight words? There are plenty of proponents of both sides but the recent trend has been toward phonics. How about ita, linguistics, experience charts, perceptual training, tapes, and computers? Do we forsake the basal reader for programmed readers? Should we teach reading in Kindergarten?

In answer to the questions, "How do you teach reading?" most teachers reply, "I teach ita or Scott, Foresman," or whatever materials they use. The reply should be, as was echoed many times at the convention, "I teach the child."

We are asking the wrong question, according to Dorothy Kendall Bracken. It should not be, "which method is best?" but "which method is best for this child?" Does he learn better aurally or visually? How far along is he in his physical, emotional and intellectual development? What is he ready to learn?

TEACHER THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR

Harris referred to recent cooperative research studies of first grade beginning reading methods which showed in study after study that teacher differences were more important than differences in methodology or materials.

What characteristics differentiate the effective teacher of reading? Dr. Artley lists three: x, warm, understanding and friendly; y, responsible and systematic; and z, imaginative and stimulating. Artley and Harris both noted that the good reading teacher asks a variety of questions which encourage student participation rather than conformity. Also, the principal has a very strong influence on teacher morale and how reading is taught.

Other factors in teacher effectiveness are time devoted to reading instruction, grouping procedures and differentiation of instruction, nature and frequency of disciplinary procedures employed (harsh criticism was shown to be detrimental), motivational procedures, and encouragement of independent reading. Artley concluded, "improved reading is a result of improved teaching. We must train better teachers of reading rather than expect a panacea in materials."

Gates referred to ages of one through seven as the Golden Age of the Intellect. During this time the child's cognitive and character development takes place. He contended that next to mother, the first grade teacher has the greatest influence on the child's attitude development. Therefore, we cannot afford to burden the teacher with too many students and too many duties. The cost of individual instruction is not too high when measured against the alternatives.

PHONICS VS SIGHT WORD CONTROVERSY

Not a question of "either-or"

Dr. Heilman stated that we must inculcate into children a set as to what reading is. It's some sight words. It's insight into letter-sound relationships. But it's all for *meaning*. "Over-emphasis either way is disastrous," he said.

The mature reader does not "sound out" every word he reads, Mrs. Bracken pointed out. If he did, reading would be a terribly slow, laborious process. Instead, he has a bank of thousands of words he recognizes at sight.

Still a child has to know phonics and apply it *automatically* (in combination with context clues) if he is to become a good reader, Heilman asserted. As we know, there are some good readers who were not taught phonics and do not know the rules. This merely means that they have learned to break the code by themselves. They can apply the generalizations without stating them as such.

Durrell has stated that teachers are belaboring the life out of phonics. On the other hand, there is general agreement that phonics must be taught *systematically* and intensively, according to Dr. Carol Winkley. The point seems to be to give children repeated opportunities to analyze words, make generalizations, and *apply* them to attack new words without emphasizing rules.

Downing pointed out the futility of teaching formal rules to children with the quotation of Confucius: "Learning without thought is labor lost." He continued, "We don't teach children the rules of talking." Oral language is acquired through experiences. Children learn from concrete experiences, to understandings or concepts, to generalizations. First must come understanding, then the ability to verbalize about it.

PHONICS BEYOND PRIMARY GRADES

Dr. Heilman said that we are operating on some false assumptions about when we should teach certain principles. One assumption is that everyone *must have learned* certain phonetic principles because they were *taught*.

The answer, of course, lies in diagnosis and differentiation of instruction. Contrary to those who see no need for phonics instruction beyond third grade, Heilman says we need to continue to teach phonics in upper grades. Not meaningless drill, but application of accent and syllabication, and whatever they missed along the way.

COMPREHENSION

Nila B. Smith says that the omnibus word "comprehension" has stood in the way of teaching the important reading skills involved. Studies show that children are not doing well in grasping meaning in reading.

Comprehension is, first of all, thinking skills. Gates said that reading requires cognitive learning as opposed to rote learning. He says that we leave children to struggle by trial and error with *cognitive tasks*. The reason, according to Dr. Smith, is that we have no clear concept of what the thinking skills are.

Downing said that we must understand how children think in order to guide their thought processes in reading. For instance, children come to school lacking the concepts of what "words" are, "sentences," "letters" or "sounds."

Dr. Smith listed the following categories of comprehension skills:

1. **Literal comprehension**--The primary, direct meaning of the author.

2. **Interpretation**--Making generalizations, making comparisons, sensing relationships.

3. **Critical reading**--Includes literal comprehension and interpretation--Evaluates, passes judgment on the value, truth or righteousness of the passage and the qualifications of the author. Examples are evaluating news items, editorials and ads.

4. **Creative reading**--The individual leaves the author's text to solve problems and seek out new ideas. To teach creative reading the teacher asks questions that call for answers beyond the text.

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

The relationships between children's oral language development and their degree of reading readiness is well established. What children have learned to speak, they now learn to read. Language development correlates with physical development. By age three and one half the average child has the power to use all the basic patterns and syntax of adult speech. Children's language *competency* may outreach their *actual performance*.

The normal setting for language acquisition is the playroom, not the classroom. Oral language is developed against a supportive background--parents who talk to the infant and reward with praise and love. If this background is missing, language development will be retarded. School-aged children who continue to use immature speech patterns such as "her did" or "me do it," as well as those who make the speech sounds incorrectly, need the help of a therapist.

According to Dr. Downing, author of Britain's *ita* reader, there is a tremendous lag between the school child's oral and written language. He contends that there is little motivation to learn writing.

Elementary students should be guided toward more mature written expression. Experience stories and other beginning reading materials should employ more mature sentence structure than they have in the past.

SUMMARY

The leaders in reading today are saying to us (1) we must diagnose each child's abilities and needs and (2) teach individual children in the way that they learn best. We must (3) attend to children's thinking processes and guide the development of thinking skills, since reading is a cognitive process. We must (4) help children to break the sound-symbol code by *systematically* presenting phonetic analysis without dwelling on rules, per se. As Dr. Smith said, "There are as many ways to teach reading as there are children."