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The Reading Debate--Which Method Works Best? This is Teaching Series.

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The varied results of three beginning reading research studies are presented. Methods of teaching beginning reading, including i/t/a, whole word approach, and code emphasis, are briefly discussed. A research project that supports evidence against claims of a "single solution" to beginning reading is discussed, and a list of practical suggestions for administrators is presented. References are included. (RT)

The Reading Debate— Which Method Works Best?

THIS IS TEACHING SERIES

Teaching, just like the students, can't stay still for very long. Knowledge and the ways needed to impart it constantly change—sometimes haltingly, sometimes so rapidly that the teaching profession must hurry to catch up. The superior teacher knows that change dominates the profession and wants to know the issues, the steps, and the goals that make teaching the harbinger of future generations.

"The Reading Debate—Which Method Works Best?" has been adapted from *The Shape of Education for 1968-69*, prepared by the editors of *Education U.S.A.*, the special weekly newsletter on current educational affairs published by the National School Public Relations Association. This booklet was written by George Neill.

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The Reading Debate—
Which Method Works Best?

No subject in education has been more widely debated over the years than reading —and rarely has so much talk been based on so little knowledge. Only recently has it been possible to support opinions on the best methods of beginning instruction in reading with the results of large-scale, significant research. Unfortunately, the results now coming in from the recent, more extensive research efforts fail to offer complete agreement on a single best answer. But they do give educators far better guidance than they ever had before.

A three-year, Carnegie Corporation-financed study of reading research between 1910 and 1965 has reached this startling conclusion: Most American children are being taught reading by an approach which 55 years of research tends to prove is less effective than another method presently available. This study was conducted by a team of researchers headed by Jeanne Chall, Harvard University professor of education.

Another research project reaches a different conclusion: There is no single "best way" to teach beginning reading. Instead, children learn to read equally well with sharply different teaching methods. The really important factor in causing good or poor reading achievement is the quality of the teacher. This view has won increasing support following a series of 27 one-, two-, and three-year reading research projects representing the largest study ever conducted on reading methods.

The Chall study concluded that the best results are achieved by a "code emphasis" approach which focuses the child's attention on a printed word—and stresses that this word is made up of letters representing

sounds that stand for the spelling of words the child hears. This is in sharp contrast to what the report calls the "meaning emphasis" approach which "focuses the child's attention on the story content and pictures." This second approach, which has dominated United States reading programs since the 1920's, places heavy emphasis on the immediate acquisition of meaning through learning whole words at sight.

Chall discovered that early stress on the "code emphasis" approach "not only produces better word recognition and spelling but also makes it easier for the child eventually to read with understanding—at least up to the beginning of the fourth grade where research evidence stops." She found little support for what she calls "the prevailing view that sees the beginning reader as a miniature adult who should, from the start, engage in mature reading of stories."

Evidence available to date on beginning reading, the Chall report says, neither proves nor disproves that one "code emphasis" method (Initial Teaching Alphabet—ITA, linguistic, or phonics) is better than another. There is also no evidence, it says, that either the "meaning emphasis" or the "code emphasis" approach fosters greater love of reading or is more interesting to children. Above all, the report stresses that the "code emphasis" approach should be used only as a beginning method—a way to start a child—and that once he has learned to recognize in print the words he knows, any additional use of this method is a waste of time and ultimately self-defeating.

"My recommendation for a change in beginning reading methods does not apply to school systems that have been getting excellent results with their present methods and materials that the teachers use with confidence," Chall says. "Many factors may make existing methods and materials that the

teachers use better suited to these schools than new ones. What is effective for a class of 35 may be too slow-moving for a class of 10 or 15. The functional type of learning that leaves the programming pretty much up to the individual pupil may work perfectly for a small class of able children with a creative teacher who already knows what to teach and when. Imposing a set, systematic program on a teacher who is knowledgeable about reading and keenly attuned to the strengths and weaknesses of her pupils may very well destroy the beauty of what she has already achieved."

Chall admits her report is "not the last word" in reading research. She is aware that numerous reading specialists disagree with the report's conclusions. But she is convinced the report accurately portrays the results of the best reading research available at the end of 1965. Her report, based on a study of 67 research studies, visits to 300 classrooms, and interviews with 500 teachers and school administrators, was released in book form at the end of 1967.

The results of the series of 27 research projects began being released in 1967 and 1968—after the Chall report had gone to the printer. The latest supporting evidence against claims of a "single solution" comes from the study's first three-year project to report final results. The project, which included 21 classes in three school districts in mid-New Jersey, compared the effectiveness of ITA, a "code emphasis" approach; the traditional "basal reader" approach long used in most U.S. beginning reading instruction, a "meaning emphasis" approach with little stress on phonics; and the "basal reader" approach with a heavy emphasis on phonics by marks added to every letter not making a regular sound. After testing the classes using the different methods at the end of the first, second, and third grade, the proj-

ect concluded: there was no difference between beginning reading methods on either the standardized oral or silent reading tests; the teacher's age or experience had little relationship to successful reading; class size, with 17-29 range, had little effect on reading achievement.

Twenty-one first-grade teachers volunteered to participate in the experiment, which was directed by Edward B. Fry, director of the Reading Center, Rutgers University. Seven classes were assigned to each of the three methods tested. Initial tests of reading, reading readiness, and IQ showed there were no significant differences among the 21 classes. Fry says his project, financed by the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) along with the 26 other projects in the study, covered many more classes than most earlier reading surveys, which rarely included more than three classes per method tested. Results from such limited efforts, he claims, are highly unreliable.

"Since people complain that educational research isn't practical," Fry says, "here are some implications of this study for the school administrator":

> Get and keep good teachers and get rid of the bad ones.
>
> Place the better teachers in the first grade.
>
> Allow the teacher to choose the reading material she wishes.
>
> Don't pay much attention to the teacher's age or experience.
>
> Give her a moderately large class (up to 30 pupils).

Fry, who believes his study will slow down the recent trend to ITA, says his conclusions "do not sustain" Jeanne Chall's theme.

Another, quite different, view on improving reading programs was offered at the 1968 conference of the American Association of School Administrators by Walter J. McHugh of California State College at Hayward. If it takes just one thing to build a better reading program, he claims, it is commitment. This commitment must encompass the teacher but, equally important, it must reflect a viewpoint by an entire school system. Without it even the hard-driving sincere efforts of the best of teachers will be thwarted. That is why McHugh will not undertake to improve school district reading programs unless principals and supervisors attend inservice training classes along with teachers. McHugh, a consultant to numerous school districts, stressed that, without participation by principals, good ideas, approaches, and enthusiasm for better reading programs are likely to languish.

Meanwhile, as the debate over reading continues in books, studies, and conferences, there are signs that definite progress is being made. Richard Madden, education professor at San Diego State College and an author of Stanford Achievement Tests, reports that today's school children show reading ability of about one half a year higher than any previous generation. This, he says, is a tribute to better instruction.

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