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ABSTRACT

Teachers, principals, and other administrators who are considering the adoption of i.t.a. for language arts in the primary grades need objective information about its advantages and its disadvantages. The purpose of this paper is to provide a list of the disadvantages which may be inherent in the adoption of i.t.a. The disadvantages of i.t.a. may be divided into two categories, factual and attitudinal. Some factual disadvantages are that the weaknesses of students, teachers, and schools are revealed more when i.t.a. is used, and the damaging effects of arbitrary administrative systems of grouping students are highlighted by an i.t.a. program. A list of negative statements which are often made about i.t.a. includes: (1) i.t.a. makes more work for the teacher; (2) i.t.a. promoters make exaggerated panacea kinds of claims; (3) i.t.a. materials are expensive; (4) i.t.a. is not a perfect alphabet; (5) i.t.a. is a phonic method; (6) i.t.a. is taught by a formal instructional approach; (7) i.t.a. is a scheme for forcing precocious readers; (8) i.t.a. is unnatural; (9) there are not enough books in i.t.a.; (10) children have difficulty in forming the i.t.a. symbols; and (11) transition from i.t.a. to traditional orthography is difficult and wastes time. (Author/WP)

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Some Reasons for NOT Using i.t.a.

Teachers, principals and other administrators who are considering the adoption of i.t.a. for language arts in the primary grades need objective information about both its advantages and its disadvantages. The disadvantages in adopting i.t.a. are less well known than the advantages. Criticisms of i.t.a. tend to be isolated and scattered through the educational literature. Some of the difficulties in introducing i.t.a. have not even been formulated. They have been felt only as unspecified discomforts in school systems using i.t.a. The purpose of this article is to provide a list of the disadvantages which may be inherent in the adoption of i.t.a.

For example, supposing a superintendent of a school district said, "I am impressed with the research which shows that i.t.a. is easier than t.o. for children to learn, but what difficulties may I encounter if I try to adopt i.t.a. in my school system?" The answer is this list of the problems which could cause his i.t.a. program to fail.

These disadvantages of i.t.a. may be divided into two categories; (1) factual, (2) attitudinal.

1. FACTUAL DISADVANTAGES

There are two real disadvantages which cannot be regarded as only matters of opinion or belief:

(a) The weaknesses of students, teachers and schools are revealed more when i.t.a. is used. This is because some of the i.t.a. symbols are obviously different from the conventional alphabet. If a student writes an i.t.a. symbol in his composition one can immediately detect that he has not yet completed the transition to t.o. Then a parent or teacher has concrete evidence of the student's lack of progress. Likewise, concrete evidence of the student's backwardness is provided if the child is reading a book printed with i.t.a. symbols.

A t.o. program does not have this disadvantage. Without the unusual i.t.a. symbols, it is much harder for observers to detect the child's level of progress. A parent cannot say, "Johnny is still writing those bizarre letters you made him learn in first grade." The parent can only say, "Johnny's spelling is bad." And the blame cannot be fixed on what was taught at the beginning.

(b) The damaging effects of arbitrary administrative systems of grouping students are high lighted by an i.t.a. program. This has been found both in Britain and in North America. However, the worst effects have been noted in Canada and the United States where the grade system still persists. Sir James Pitman's original design for i.t.a. allowed for maximum ease of transition to t.o. when the child had achieved a certain level of fluency in i.t.a. Many of the slower developing students cannot attain this level by the end of first grade. Unfortunately, salesmen for American i.t.a. materials have believed it is to their advantage to claim that i.t.a. is a first grade program and that all children can complete the transition before entering second grade. But, as all the research shows, this claim is false. The slower learners are not ready for transition by the end of grade one. Their "failure" is more obvious than it would be in t.o. Either they must repeat the first grade or the second grade teacher's work must be disturbed by asking her to handle students still using i.t.a. In Britain this disadvantage is less serious because the grade system disappeared some twenty-five years ago, and children must be allowed to progress at their own pace. Hence they transfer to t.o. from i.t.a. when the appropriate level of readiness is achieved. Nevertheless, there is in British primary schools a sharp division by age when children leave the infants' school (ages 5-7) and enter the junior school (7-11). Some children are still not ready for transition to t.o. at the end of the infants' school years. Often junior schools are not prepared to continue the i.t.a. program for these children. In these circumstances one of two things tends to occur. Either the infants' teacher pressures the child into

transition too soon, or the child's need for transitional teaching is neglected in the junior school.

In both countries the outcome for educational administrators is the same - increased public awareness of the potentially damaging influence of arbitrary administrative groupings of students. Thus the introduction of the i.t.a. innovation is likely to accelerate demands for greater individualization of teaching and more flexibility in systems of grouping.

These two disadvantages have been labelled "factual" because, although they may sound somewhat ironic, they are genuine difficulties with which a superintendent of schools must contend.

2. ATTITUDINAL DISADVANTAGES

An "attitude" in social psychology is defined as a tendency to behave in a particular way. Thus, although they exist only in the mind, they may have powerful influences on what people actually do. Perhaps these disadvantages ought not to be separated from the "factual" ones, because attitudes are facts too. They exist and are very important. Indeed, they are probably more important than the factual disadvantages listed in the preceding section.

Block (2) notes, "Reviewing the status of i.t.a. in 1971 one must acknowledge the great resistance to its adoption which still exists." He emphasizes the enormous volume of research supporting i.t.a.'s use, and bemoans educators' unwillingness to pay attention to it. This discrepency between the positive conclusions of research on i.t.a.'s effects on children's learning and the decision of educators not to use it suggests

the hypothesis that powerful negative attitudes exist toward i.t.a. This hypothesis has been confirmed in a recent investigation by Weeks (31).

Weeks' attitude scale was administered to 228 infants' school teachers in England. The teachers were in two categories; "i.t.a. users" and "t.o. users". He found, "The attitude measures distinguished clearly between users and potential users of i.t.a. and t.o. users." Also, "The presence of feeling against i.t.a. on the part of most non-users has been quantified by the study."

Recognition of the existence of negative attitudes towards i.t.a. is demonstrated by the recommendations of two earlier studies: (i) The Inner London Education Authority's (19) i.t.a. experiment included among its conclusions, "The school staff concerned, and not only those in the infants' schools, should be willing to make the change. If it is introduced against their belief and wishes, the effect may well be a lowering of their morale and interest - and efficiency". (ii) Warburton and Southgate (30) in their comprehensive study of i.t.a. in America and Britain for the Schools Council (the official curriculum body for England and Wales) issued this note of caution; "Before beginning to use i.t.a. the headteacher needs to be certain that the staff are eager to experiment with it or at least willing to cooperate fully." Weeks' rigorous attitude survey technique confirms the earlier subjective impressions that teachers' attitudes are a vital factor in the adoption of i.t.a.

The existence of these negative attitudes towards i.t.a. represents two kinds of difficulties for the school administrator. Firstly, effort must be expended in finding teachers with positive attitudes toward i.t.a. Secondly, if the program is expanded efforts may have to be made to change negative attitudes to make them more positive.

Research in advertising and propaganda shows how difficult it is to change people's attitudes. This is because attitudes are often based not on reality but on imagination and emotion. A plan to make teachers' attitudes more positive toward i.t.a. would have to begin with research on their contents and what caused them.

As a beginning, it may be helpful to provide here a list of negative statements which are often made about i.t.a. In addition the extent to which each belief has any foundation in reality will be indicated by rating it from "0" through "10" according to the consensus of the evidence on the facts. This reality score (R.S.) will be followed by references to examples of research studies supporting the score.

(a) i.t.a. makes much more work for the teacher. R.S.=10. Numerous studies show that the range of attainments broadens much more rapidly in an i.t.a. class. This increases greatly the demands on the teacher to individualize instruction (Downing - 4; McCracken - 24). Also the teacher must undertake the extra work of learning the i.t.a. alphabet and making new charts and other aids in the new alphabet. Probably i.t.a. demands exceptionally high standards of teaching and

professional dedication. The school principal too has additional work if he adopts an i.t.a. program. For example, he has to take additional care to brief the parents.

(b) i.t.a. promoters make exaggerated panacea kinds of claims. R.S.=2 (Britain); 6 (North America). This reality score is hard to estimate because the situation is changing. Two or three years ago the North American R.S. would have been 10. The most outrageously false claims were being made. These were picked up quite innocently and repeated by perfectly honest educators who had been misled. For example, Nilsen (25) wrote in Elementary English that i.t.a. "has been adopted as the official beginning alphabet in British schools." The truth is that i.t.a. has never been officially adopted in Britain. The proportion of British schools using i.t.a. has not been greater than between 15 and 20 per cent. The claims of advertising and salesmen for certain i.t.a. materials swamped the protests of professional educators using i.t.a. who nevertheless deplored these hard sell Madison Avenue techniques (Downing - 5 and 6). Currently, many reading specialists and other educators retain a disgust for i.t.a. which was caused by these earlier exaggerated claims.

(c) i.t.a. materials are expensive. R.S.=1. The grain of truth is that the i.t.a. classroom obviously has to be "retooled" with i.t.a. materials. But since i.t.a. materials cost no more to produce than t.o. ones the annual budget for maintaining i.t.a. classes should be the same as for t.o. classes.

(d) i.t.a. is not a perfect alphabet. R.S.=1. Sir James Pitman's i.t.a. has been in use now for twelve years. Several of those who have conducted research on i.t.a. have raised the question, "Could i.t.a. be improved?" (Downing - 7; Warburton and Southgate - 30). But, thus far, experimental attempts to improve i.t.a. have not been encouraging. For example, an experiment by Oliver, Nelson, and Downing (26) found no significant difference between i.t.a. and two other orthographic techniques for improving grapheme-phoneme relations. All three were equally and significantly superior to t.o. Hence, these findings lead to the conclusion that "any modifications to i.t.a. are likely to be of minor, if any, importance in increasing i.t.a.'s superiority over t.o." (11). Nevertheless, many reading specialists and teachers believe that they must wait for a better alphabet than i.t.a. to be developed.

(e) i.t.a. is a phonic method. R.S.=0. This totally unrealistic belief causes two different anti-i.t.a. attitudes: (i) For teachers who believe in beginning with phonics, i.t.a. is not needed because there are many other good phonic methods which are less bizarre and troublesome to introduce because the alphabet does not need to be changed; (ii) For teachers who are opposed to a phonics beginning, i.t.a. is rejected "because it is a phonic method". The truth is that i.t.a. is only an alphabet. It can be taught by any method of instruction known to teachers. Sir James Pitman (27) stated this explicitly when he first announced his invention of i.t.a. It has been reiterated frequently in the past twelve

years. For example, the official Schools Council report states that "it would be a grave error to assume that the use of i.t.a. had brought about an increase in formal phonic training." (30). Numerous other denials could be cited, but why have they been necessary? Because of the persistent false belief that i.t.a. is a method of instruction in phonics.

(f) i.t.a. is taught by a formal instructional approach. R.S.=1 (Britain); 7.5 (North America). The difference between the British R.S. and the North American R.S. indicates that this belief is really completely imaginary because there is obviously no necessary correlation between i.t.a. and formal approaches to teaching reading. Cogniscence of this false belief is indicated by the following quotation from the official Schools Council report:

> "The early fears of certain educationists that the introduction of i.t.a. would lead to an increase in formal teaching did not appear to have been justified. Indeed, certain inspectors reported that in some of the more formal schools the use of i.t.a. had led to greater informality in the grouping of children and in classroom procedures, as a result of children quickly becoming independent of the teacher when they found they could make good attempts at reading and spelling on their own." (30)

Furthermore, several excellent publications are available which describe in detail how i.t.a. is used in the "open" informal approach of modern British primary schools. (Gayford - 18; Leigh - 22,23; Downing et al 12).

(g) i.t.a. is a scheme for forcing precocious readers. R.S.=0. This anti-i.t.a. belief is heard less often now than 10 years ago, probably because forcing precocious readers has become more fashionable. But it never has been true (5).

(h) i.t.a. is unnatural. R.S.=0. Some teachers feel that i.t.a. is unnatural because it is a synthetic alphabet found only in school and not in the outside environment. But it is not "unnatural" to young beginners if no one tells them that i.t.a. is different from t.o. Young children do not possess the same concepts of written symbols as adults. (Downing - 8; Reid - 28).

(i) There are not enough books in i.t.a. R.S.=3. This R.S. is difficult to estimate. "Enough" depends on one's expectations. The i.t.a. Foundation distributes a catalogue of some one thousand books published by various companies (20). Also, of course, the i.t.a. classroom is not restricted to i.t.a. books only. It should have t.o. books too. Therefore, the full range of books is available to the i.t.a. teacher.

(j) Children have difficulty in forming the i.t.a. symbols. R.S.=0. The Schools Council report found that teachers who had experienced i.t.a. were generally unconcerned about any problem of letter formation. On the contrary, it states that writing in i.t.a. "begins at a much earlier age; it is greater in quantity; and the quality has improved in content, in the flow of ideas and in the breadth of vocabulary used." (30). This conclusion has been confirmed in several statistical comparisons of i.t.a. writing with t.o. writing. (Auguste and Nalven - 1; Downing, Fyfe, and Lyon - 16).

(k) i.t.a. students will fail because of the conflict between i.t.a. in the classroom and t.o. in the outside environment. R.S.=0. This is an alternative version of anti-i.t.a. attitude #"h". It rests on the same adultcentric view. But the child does not perceive the different i.t.a. and t.o. categories recognized by the adult. They are all new to the child. The other day a mother told the author that her child said "When am I going to transition, Mom? It's very difficult." "But," replied mother, "you are reading the newspaper!" "Isn't that in i.t.a.?" came the response.

(l) i.t.a. is based on upper class British pronunciation of English. It will not work with American pronunciation especially dialects. R.S.=0. Although the R.S. is 0, there is some justification for this false belief because until recently no genuine attempt had been made to explain i.t.a. in terms of the phonemes of American English. However, this deficiency has been made good in 1973. The fact that i.t.a. can be explained in this new publication (15) just as systematically in relation to an American pronouncing dictionary as it can be to a British one, indicates that i.t.a. is certainly not tied to any particular dialect of English. Sir James Pitman deliberately designed i.t.a. to be effective in the broad range of English dialects and research indicates he was generally successful. (14)

(m) Children will become confused if they move from a school where i.t.a. is taught to one where t.o. is the rule. R.S.=0. There is no evidence that this is a real hazard. On the contrary, experience shows

that i.t.a. students usually adapt to the t.o. program although they lose something by failing to complete the course they had begun. This is a special facet of one of the "factual disadvantages" listed in the first part of this article. Very often children transferring from one school to another have to adjust to a different program. When one of those programs is i.t.a. and the other is t.o. the difference between them is more obvious to the adult.

(n) Parents will not be able to help the i.t.a. student with his reading at home. R.S.=2. Some reality must be allowed to this negative attitude although it is not a necessary fault in i.t.a. If the school takes some care to inform parents about i.t.a., they can help just as much as usual. Several inexpensive publications describe i.t.a. for parents (3; 9; 21).

(o) Transition from i.t.a. to t.o. is difficult and time wasting because the i.t.a. student must "unlearn" i.t.a. and learn all over again in t.o. R.S.=0. The evidence showing the ease of transition from i.t.a. to t.o. is overwhelming. The Schools Council report contains the most comprehensive review of the research (30). But the research has been available for several years now, yet the "unlearning" problem is still frequently mentioned as a negative attribute of i.t.a. This seems to be because it is not generally realized that the skills of reading and writing exist quite apart from any specific alphabet or even any particular language. Once a person can read and write, he can use his reading and writing skills in any alphabet or any language. In taking up another alphabet or another language these skills do not have to be "unlearned". Some new additional specific details have to be acquired (10).

(p) The effect of i.t.a. fades away after a few years. R.S.=8.5. This has a high reality rating because most times it does happen that way. But in some studies the early effects of i.t.a. have been maintained. (17). Even if superior scores are not sustained several years after the students have completed the i.t.a. program this does not invalidate the use of i.t.a. at the primary level. The fading effect may be due to the lack of follow-up teaching after i.t.a. In any case, as the Schools Council report mentions, even if the earlier gains are lost, "The educational and intellectual advantages of a child learning to read fluently at a very early age are very considerable and may affect his whole confidence and future progress." (30) Also it has been pointed out that, "It matters what children do in every grade and on every day they are in school. If more first grade children can enjoy the ability to read and write creatively because of i.t.a., that does matter irrespective of any statistical 'no significant difference' at some later date. We are accountable for every single day of the child's life. We can never be certain if tomorrow will come for him." (13).

(q) It's all due to "Hawthorne Effect". R.S.=1. Where Hawthorne Effect has been tested explicitly in i.t.a. research, it has been found to be of no significant importance (7). Even if that finding is challenged, it is difficult to see how the Hawthorne Effect could persist for five years, which is the period that i.t.a. has been in use in Vancouver, B. C. schools. The city school district has conducted regular research on i.t.a. since 1966. In 1971 the Vancouver School Board conducted a questionnaire

survey in 13 schools with i.t.a. classes, a representative sample of the 49 Vancouver schools using i.t.a. Their report (29) states:

> "The respondents commonly noted as effects of i.t.a. on reading achievement 'earlier start,' 'more rapid progress,' 'fluency in oral reading,' 'skill in word attack,' 'greater self-confidence,' 'greater interest' and 'more independence in reading.' They felt that i.t.a. contributed greatly to the written expression of children in that they 'write more, earlier and with greater freedom, Similarly positive comments were made about oral expression; 'increased vocabulary,' 'better pronunciation,' and 'more natural'."

Also the report concluded:

> "In general, teachers and principals reacted positively to i.t.a. as a medium for teaching beginners to read."

And that is after five years!

However an R.S. of 1 has been given this belief because there may be some motivational effect on teachers and students when i.t.a. is first introduced and they are the subject of observation and visitation until i.t.a. has been accepted as part of the local scene.

But this belief that "it's all Hawthorne Effect" goes much deeper. It is symptomatic of a much more pervasive attitude which here happens to be associated with indifference or antagonism toward i.t.a. This broader attitude is the rejection of educational research as a valid basis for school decisions. As the Comparative Reading project has shown, educational fashions often have more influence than educational research (14).

CONCLUSIONS

The school superintendent considering the adoption of i.t.a. must weigh a number of disadvantages in i.t.a.'s implementation against the positive findings of research on its effectiveness in helping children to learn to read more easily. Indeed, the research findings may have little influence against the strong force of the negative attitudes and beliefs of teachers who are opposed to using i.t.a. Also, even if i.t.a. is successfully introduced, it has the practical disadvantage of revealing more clearly to outside observers such as parents where the defects are in the schools' organization and teaching. Probably a successful use of i.t.a. demands exceptionally good schools and superior teachers.

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