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ABSTRACT

Unlike trends in reading and writing instruction which are shortlived, such as speed reading, performance contracting, and the i.t.a. (initial teaching alphabet), certain influences exist which contribute to lasting improvements in reading and writing. Several factors can help to distinguish trends from the more permanent influences on education. A historical perspective is necessary for a sound research-based reading and writing curriculum to meet the needs of changing populations. It is also necessary to strive for greater language precision when discussing literacy and learning disabilities. Other cultures, languages, and customs must be explored in order to teach reading and writing effectively to a diverse population. All of these factors should be considered when training reading and writing teachers at all levels. (A 27-item bibliography is attached.) (MM)

Influences Contributing to Lasting Improvements in Reading and Writing in the United States

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"I'm going to learn to read and write."
- The Unsinkable Molly Brown

"The dear people do not know how long it takes to learn to read. I have been at it all my life and I cannot yet say I have reached the goal."
- Goethe

"All that I have accomplished is that I have written a few good sentences.... The sentences that I have written are going to stay. They have staying power."
- Eric Hoffer

Why do some ideas come and go while others remain? What is it about Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, The Lord's Prayer, The Gettysburg Address, and Kol Nidre that make them so memorable?

Do you remember some of the ideas in education that were going to set the world on fire only a couple decades ago?

I'd like to briefly reminisce with you about three of those ideas that, for all practical purposes, died; note some lingering, positive effects; and then discuss five current and future influences contributing to lasting improvements in reading and writing.

Speed Reading (an idea to increase reading efficiency)

This idea appeared, in one form or another, in the professional and popular literature and media. Talk-show hosts had guests who claimed

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reading speeds of 50,000 words-a-minute. Senator William Proxmire appeared in ads for Evelyn Wood's Reading Dynamics. Companies carried ads with statements by President John F. Kennedy. Ordinary people appeared in promotions; one ad, for example, pictured a plumber who said that his business was going down the drain until he took one of the commercial speed reading courses.

In the professional literature, articles and research reports appeared in the publications of the International Reading Association. In 1967 I put together an Annotated Bibliography on Speed Reading for the International Reading Association, which was updated in 1970 and 1976 (the last time under the title of Rates of Comprehension). The topic appeared on the programs of professional conferences such as the annual meetings of the National Reading Conference and the International Reading Association; in 1968, at the IRA Convention meeting in Boston, Nila Banton Smith, one of the distinguished leaders in the field, set up a Saturday morning program in which 17 current issues in reading were discussed concurrently. She invited me to speak about speed reading for 40 minutes objectively; two other speakers each spoke 15 minutes for and against speed reading. Vearl McBride, the speaker in favor of speed reading, claimed that he could teach people to read two and three books at the same time; during the question-answer session, he claimed that he once taught a student to read 500,000 words-a-minute!

Performance Contracting (an idea to increase teaching effectiveness)

This idea was going to revolutionize the teaching of reading, math, and other skills. Companies contracted with school systems to teach children and to be reimbursed, largely, on how much students improved on agreed-upon

tests. One of the first school systems to enter into such an arrangement was in Texarkana, Arkansas, followed by school systems in Gary, Indiana, and other large and small cities throughout the nation. Feature articles about this "new" idea appeared in the news magazines and throughout other media.

Before performance contracting spread throughout the United States, it was tried--and rejected--a hundred years earlier in Canada and England. The only difference in the practice was that instead of school systems giving money to companies, school boards gave money to their own schools, depending upon how much students increased scores on basic tests. The same problems--teaching for the test, and others--that took place in the United States took place a century earlier in Canada and England.

i.t.a. (the initial teaching alphabet--an idea to increase success in learning to read)

This idea had the backing of the British Parliament. Based on the concept that there are approximately 44 sounds in the English language, let us have one symbol for each sound. For example, instead of having the long a sound represented by a, or maid, or weigh, or may, etc., let it be represented by ae for children learning to read English.

The idea was devised by Sir James Pitman and spread throughout England and the United States. The Ford Foundation established a center at Lehigh University under the direction of Albert Mazurkiewicz. He and others wrote school books, newsletters, did research, and established centers. John Downing, formerly of the London Institute and later with the University of Victoria, traveled extensively and spoke on the topic throughout the United States and Canada.

When i.t.a. was riding high in the sixties, educators came from all over to visit the center of activity at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Everyone would have been happy if the i.t.a. classrooms were used as demonstrations. But when they began being used as experimental classrooms in research reports, with hardly anyone visiting the comparison classrooms using basal readers, then the research became flawed through the Hawthorne Effect. Parents became concerned about misspellings even though children wrote with increased fluency.

Like the other two ideas, an industry grew up around the initial teaching alphabet. In a conversation that I had with John Downing a year before he died, he said that, if he had to do it all over again, he would recommend that first graders begin using i.t.a. when they start school and make the transition to traditional orthography by Christmastime.

"The past is never dead . . ."

But, as William Faulkner said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

The idea of speed reading emerges in part as the more respectable concept of flexible reading or rates of comprehension.

The idea of performance contracting encourages goals in reading and writing instruction.

The idea of i.t.a. reminds us of the importance of early success for children.

Even though the "sound and the fury is over," these effects linger.

Influences Contributing To Lasting Improvements In Reading and Writing

A Greater Sense of History

Without an historical perspective, Santayana's observation that we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past applies to reading and writing instruction. An historical perspective, for example, enables us to understand the role of technology. Without this understanding, extravagant claims will be made--and unmade--about every new invention. When ball-point pens replaced fountain pens, when typewriters and computers became available, the same claims were made (without a shred of evidence): children would write better. Nowadays, the claims go even further--children will not only write better, they will also think better.

When radio, TV, and VCR's came into our homes, many educators worried that people would read less. What a pleasant surprise to find that children are encouraged to read through Mr. Rogers, Sesame Street, and Reading Rainbow. As for adults, librarians know that there is always a demand for books after television presentations based on the books.

The encouraging facts are that more books are written, published, and read now than ever before in our history, with book sales up 400 percent since the advent of television forty years ago, according to a report this month by Lynne V. Cheney, Chair, National Endowment for the Humanities.

Sound Research-Based Curriculum (including affective as well as cognitive domains--feeling as well as thinking)

Relatively little goes on in schools that is based on sound educational research. Usually, opinions are expressed as facts, and decisions are based on economic, social, or political considerations. Witness the controversies

swirling about early schooling, bilingual education, textbooks, testing, adult literacy, to give but a few examples.

In his national report on the American high school, Ernest Boyer claims that "clear writing leads to clear thinking." With the idea of exploring with my students the underpinnings of his statement, I wrote to him for the supporting research. The reply I received informed me that the statement is not based on research but is an opinion based upon observation. Well, my observation is that it's the other way around: clear thinking leads to clear writing and that, if anything, writing tests thinking.

When claims such as clear writing leads to clear thinking do not materialize, the public once again becomes disenchanted. Adding to the dilemma are opinions backed by powerful forces buffeting elementary and secondary curricula. The censorship movement is widespread and, in many places, successful in pushing thoughtful writings out of the curriculum. In many school systems the tail wags the dog with standardized testing driving the curriculum.

Yet, even with all this flurry of activity, schools have made improvements in the teaching of the English language arts. There is a greater awareness of individual differences, more understanding about language, a keener awareness of the way the arts of language work together. Textbooks and school books have undergone dramatic changes: the degrading stereotypes, either through omission or comission, about males and females and ethnic groups have diminished greatly. Books by real authors are now being used along with and, in some schools, in place of basal readers. Many of these changes are influenced by educational research. To continue the improvements, it would be helpful to have two links which tend to be missing

between researchers and schools: the synthesizer of research and the translator of research. These roles (particularly the latter) have, for the most part, been filled by publishing companies. Bridging research and practice, nowadays, is the teacher-as-researcher movement spreading across the country with financial incentives given by state and national reading and writing organizations.

Greater Language Precision

Unless we clean up our language and improve our definitions, how are we to know what we're doing? Or even talking about? UNESCO defines literacy as reading at the fourth grade level whereas functional literacy would necessitate being able to read at least comparable to ninth and twelfth grade levels in the United States.

Earlier this month I found in my mailbox a mailing originating on campus that stated that "one in five can't read." Thinking that it would be interesting to learn the source of that quote, I put a graduate student on the trail. She learned that the statement came from the Greater Cincinnati Literacy Task Force. When she called the Greater Cincinnati Literacy Task Force, a spokeswoman said that she would send some brochures. They arrived and contained similar information with no source given. The graduate student is now gathering information to try to make sense of the multitude of definitions relating to literacy.

Last week I watched a poignant television film, "Open Admissions," in which a college student was told that he is reading at the fourth grade level and that there are 21 million others like him. Jonathan Kozol recently reported that 60 million adults are functionally illiterate in America. About the same time CBS announced that 25 million people cannot

read because they have learning disabilities. Earlier this year the news media reported that 90% of the half million men and women in our jails have learning disabilities. Millions more people cannot read or write English because they do not know English.

If my arithmetic is correct, and there are not too many crossovers, it seems that there are only three people left in the United States who can read and write English.

I do not wish to appear to be minimizing the problem: there are vast numbers of people who cannot read and write well enough to cope in our highly technological world; and even if there were only one such person, that would be a tragedy.

But what are the practical consequences of tossing around figures and words so carelessly? The greatest damage, of course, is to school children. By being labeled or mislabeled, they become boxed in and a certain amount of their free will is taken away. There is a tendency to focus on their weaknesses and errors (reflected by the attention given to error-analysis in both reading and writing), rather than on their strengths and successes. They are taught remedially rather than developmentally. The widespread use of the medical model in education is reflected in terminology such as diagnostic or prescriptive teaching, reading and writing laboratory, terminal student. Related dangers include describing educational problems in medical language and then over-prescribing drugs to solve the problems. On a larger scale, the persistent misuse of language moves us closer to becoming a remedial nation.

Dyslexia is a word that once referred to perceptual and neurological disorders affecting language. Even though there is a relatively small

percentage of students who have the problem, the term is now used with a wide brush in a generic manner to the extent that it has been referred to as "a mysterious malady" by the National Education Association.

Learning disabilities is a term that has now gone far beyond its original meaning in Public Law. Failure to learn to read is now perceived to be a physical disability rather than an academic or socioeconomic disadvantage. Within one decade the number of students classified as learning disabled increased by 119 percent whereas the number of disadvantaged students decreased 42 percent--even though the academic problems and legal descriptions suggest that, for the most part, these are the same students!

By using the jargon now in vogue, we shift the source for academic problems away from the schools, away from the homes, even away from the free will of children, to some kind of mysterious flaw in their brains. Not so long ago researchers who were not educators received a great deal of publicity using similar language to explain the academic performance of black children in this country.

One of the "new" problems discovered in school children is ADD--Attention Deficit Disorder. Chapters have formed all over the United States to combat this alleged problem which, it is claimed, affects no less than 20 percent of the population in North America.

Fortunately, there is some light on the national horizon. Documents are now appearing which suggest a reconsideration and a restoration of balance. In the the lead article in the March 1987 issue of Scientific American, Frank Vellutino (who was an invited speaker to our campus last year), presents convincing evidence that most literacy problems have an

educational, rather than a perceptual or neurological, base.' In "Educating Students with Learning Problems--A Shared Responsibility," concerns about labeling and misusing language are expressed by Madeline Will, Director of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, U.S. Department of Education. She recommends a reconsideration of ongoing practices and school organization. Similar thoughts are expressed by Anne McGill-Franzen in "Failure to Learn to Read: Formulating a Policy Problem" in the Fall 1987 issue of the Reading Research Quarterly and by Alan Gartner and Dorothy Lipsky in "Beyond Special Education: Toward a Quality System for All Students," in the November 1987 issue of Harvard Educational Review.

In Ohio, the need to reconsider current practices is cautiously being expressed by officials in the Department of Education.

Changing Populations

To teach reading and writing well we need to know as much as possible about other cultures, other languages, other customs. The fastest growing groups in this country are Hispanics, nearly five times faster than the rest of the population, according to a report earlier this month from the Census Bureau. As teachers we have to be aware that under the word Hispanic, there are Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, Puerto Rican-Americans, and others with Spanish surnames, each with unique culture and customs, not to mention individuals within these groups, some of whom have been in this country for six generations, such as Lauro F. Cavazos, the new U.S. Commissioner of Education.

In many schools and school systems minorities now make up the majority of the school population. Many majority as well as minority children in our classrooms now live in single-parent families.

In the nineteenth century Henri Stendhal wrote one of the world's great novels, The Red and the Black. The setting of his story takes place in a time when there were only two ways to escape from poverty: through the red, the uniform of the military, or through the black, the uniform of the clergy. In this century the way out of poverty is through education.

But there are many among us who do not know how to take the first step to help their children. Earlier this year, for example, one of our graduate students teaching in a nearby school district told us about the hard time she had teaching reading to elementary school children until she realized that they didn't know what a "story" was. For purposes of illustration, I'd like to mention two things that I did to reach out to parents and children.

When I was teaching at the University of Alberta, I wondered why there were so few native Indian students at that large university. So with the cooperation of native groups, I became very involved with nine Indian families and forty Indian children, with extensive visits in their homes on two reserves and in the City of Edmonton. Working with me was J. P. Das, whose work in simultaneous and sequential learning strategies resulted in an award from the International Reading Association. Our short- and long-range goals were to gather information on which to develop a creative language arts curriculum for Canadian Indian children to use throughout the Province of Alberta and in the Northwest Territories by bouncing it off Telstar.

Four years ago I wrote to all the state governors, all the state superintendents of education, and presidents going back thirty years of the Nati ouncil of the Teachers of English and the International Reading As i asked one question: "If it were in your power, what one thing would you do to improve the reading and writing skills of boys and

girls?" The governors and educators gave four major suggestions: improve teacher education, reduce class size, increase targeted funding, but most said that they would try harder to reach parents and get more books, magazines, and newspapers into their homes. And they are right, for children who read tend to come from homes where they see someone older reading regularly. An incidental finding is that while the responses of politicians were similar to those of educators, governors tended to use lay language and educators tended to use educational terminology. This may explain the occasional breakdown in communication between educators and politicians.

Education of Reading and Writing Teachers

There is no question that teachers and future teachers are more systematically prepared to teach reading and writing. Nearly every state now requires that teacher-preparation institutions address the teaching of reading, writing and the other language arts for all new elementary school teachers, and that they address the teaching of reading for all new secondary school teachers and the teaching of writing for all new secondary English teachers, using guidelines prepared by appropriate learned societies.

At Miami University we go beyond the state requirements: future elementary school teachers take a course in the teaching of reading and a course in the teaching of language arts; future English teachers take a course in advanced composition or creative writing and backgrounds to composition theory and research.

Future secondary school teachers take a course in the teaching of reading in their area of specialty. We here are on the cutting edge of this

kind of course; instead of grouping all the content areas together, we have separate sections for math education majors, science education majors, social studies education majors, and English education majors. With the cooperation of the Office of Learning Assistance, tutoring linkages have been established between students enrolled in the course and other interested students throughout the university community. A comparable course is available for practicing teachers at the graduate level.

In the sixties, Mary Austin wrote The Torch Lighters, a comprehensive report on improving the teaching of reading in the United States. One of her recommendations, that senior professors teach undergraduates, has been practiced for years in the Department of Teacher Education and the School of Education and Allied Professions at Miami University.

For practicing teachers, the English Department sponsors the Ohio Writing Project, which is part of a national network. An annual reading conference begun here years ago in the former Curriculum and Instruction Department is still conducted each summer through the Department of Educational Leadership. In Teacher Education and other departments, seminars and courses are imbued with the philosophy that reading and writing are processes as well as products, a view reflected in the Miami Plan for Liberal Education.

As improved as reading and writing education is for current and future elementary and secondary school teachers, attention needs to be given to school principals. Except for what they learned about teaching reading and writing as beginning teachers, school law does not require them to update their knowledge. The situation is even more bizarre in New Jersey which, in September 1989, becomes the first state in the nation to allow people with

no teaching experience to manage schools. The upshot is that most principals are unable to provide leadership in designing or implementing a pluralistic, cohesive reading and writing curriculum either in their schools or district. Without leadership, many teachers are unaware that they can select a variety of materials to meet the goals and objectives in a course of study or curriculum. In many of these schools children are tested as much as they are taught. Some of the testing is done by psychologists who have no courses in the teaching of reading or writing. Often they test individual students with standardized tests originally designed to be used with groups. The tested (and sometimes mistested) children are then labeled, mislabeled, sorted and many are made to leave the teachers who know and understand how to teach reading, writing, language arts, or both.

With principals in key roles to improve reading and writing, we in the Heckert Center are planning the second annual Leaders for Literacy Conference, which last year was cosponsored by the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

Conclusion

It is clear that we have made great strides in learning how to teach reading and writing across the curriculum. The questions that we used to ask in the sixties, we no longer ask for we know the answers: we know how to improve reading and writing. With this knowledge and an historical perspective, with clarity and honesty of vision, we can create a sound research-based reading and writing curriculum to meet the needs of our changing populations. With the cooperation and good will of leaders in the school and corporate worlds, we can influence the conditions under which children will live and learn best.

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