

Curriculum Research

C. W. Hunnicutt

"Why Can't They Read?"

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WHY CAN'T THEY READ? This question has exasperated and fascinated school people for untold generations. To many an upper-grade teacher the answer is simple, "They should have been taught phonics thoroughly in the primary grades." Most teachers by now, however, are aware that this is not an adequate solution. Merely learning to translate printed symbols into sounds doesn't help a person to understand words with which he has no speaking familiarity—a major problem in the upper grades. Besides, since our language is only partially phonetic, phonics cannot be fully relied upon for mere translation into sound.

Some Possible Causes

How then can we account for our poor readers? Presumably, if we can discover the causes we can correct or mollify the difficulty and be more successful in preventing or solving the reading problems. If by ill chance the causes should prove irremediable, we can relax our efforts and soften the pressures upon the retarded readers. We can feel less guilty at our failures and, in turn, relieve the children of their guilt feelings.

Physical handicaps were among the first causes to be suspected. Obviously, a person who cannot see, cannot read a printed page. Perhaps, then, people who were partial readers had some open or obscure visual defect handicapping them. Early research was promising (and poor readers should always be examined for correctable defects), but more thorough investigation showed little relation between vision and

relative success in reading. Poor readers and good readers are about equally likely to have poor vision or good vision.

Other physical difficulties were investigated with similar outcomes. Hearing difficulties, speech handicaps, orthopedic impairments, and cerebral palsy have all shown a surprisingly limited effect upon reading competence. Perhaps the very fact of physical limitation inhibited a child's activity in other areas and stimulated him to find satisfactions in the quiet sport of reading. Extensive reading thus overcame potential difficulty and retardation.

Intelligence Tests

What about I.Q.'s? Again the obvious relationship is present. People with very low intelligence (idiots, imbeciles, and most morons) do not learn to read; those with high intelligence usually do. Early group studies showed a marked positive correlation between reading scores and intelligence test scores—especially where the intelligence tests depended in part upon the students' ability to read. Yet every experienced teacher or clinician has encountered children with high scores on non-reading intelligence tests who have extreme difficulty in learning to read. Among poor readers are those who make scores on intelligence tests that range all the way from very low to very high. When the test scores are analyzed into their component parts, however, a few trends appear. Poor readers have higher scores on the non-verbal than on the verbal portions. They have somewhat higher scores on hearing comprehension

than on visual comprehension, and their auditory memory span is greater than their visual. In general, though, the scores on intelligence tests are not conclusive as a means of discovering the causes of poor reading. Nor are they adequate as a determinant for class grouping.

Consider Other Causes

The theory that reading difficulties may be due to mixed cerebral dominance (for example, ambidexterity, or right-eyedness and left-handedness) has had wide publicity. In the same category is shifted-handedness, where a child who started life using one hand primarily was forced to learn to write with the other. Group studies have shown little relation between these and reading ability. But whether or not the theories are true, the educational implications are the same. For those children who show an excessive number of reversals, we simply do a more careful job of teaching. Moreover, since some children may be injured by being forced to change their handedness, we should ordinarily give our left-handers freedom to write with the hand of their choice.

There are other school experiences that may cause difficulty. Do the children start formal reading at too young an age? Do they miss out on crucial learnings at key stages of development, either through absence or through transfer from school to school? Are they members of so large a class that they receive too little individual attention? Do they learn faulty habits that remain uncorrected? Do teachers use methods which do not happen to fit the personality or learning pattern of certain individuals?

Home and neighborhood often are handicaps. Sterile surroundings with too few stimulating experiences may furnish but a limited reservoir of concepts as a foundation for reading. The teachers have an even greater-than-normal need to see that such children have abundant concrete experiences with a chance to discuss them and to build concepts. Many school systems, aware of all these difficulties, have made a concentrated attack upon them.

Schenectady, New York, as but one example, has highly individualized reading experiences throughout the grades.

The Emotions and Personality

The area of reading research, however, that today appears to hold particular promise is the basic study of personality and emotions. Numerous studies (among others Gann, Missildine, Robinson, Sheldon, Wiksell) have been establishing what has long been recognized from casual observation: people with reading problems are very likely to be carrying excessive emotional burdens.

Remedies are not entirely clear. Experimental proof in this field is particularly difficult to establish. A given technique works splendidly in a clinic but is ineffective in the classroom. In fact, almost anything is likely to work well in a clinic where a child is receiving individual attention and made to feel important. The success a child achieves in reading depends greatly upon his attitudes toward himself and toward his environment. If he comes to think of himself basically as a competent person, he is likely to become more competent in reading. Conversely, early or continued teacher or parental condemnation is likely to lower a child's sense of personal worth and may create barriers to future success in reading.

Among others, Virginia Axline has reported findings that offer great hope. She suggests ways in which we may free the basic personality structure of children so that they can come closer to achieving their full capacity. With thirty-seven poor or non-readers in the second grade, she used a form of group play therapy in the classroom. It approached the permissive atmosphere of non-directive psychotherapy. Individuals were allowed ample expression through art materials, play materials, free dramatics, music, and sharing experiences. Despite little or no stress upon reading, the children made marked progress therein. Assistance in working out their emotional problems had apparently helped them achieve the freedom

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This has been a wonderful opportunity for me to see for myself the enormous effort made in America at all levels of education. But, more than once I wished that some American educators could have a parallel experience in my own country. For instance, I was surprised and sorry to read in recent books, and in some written by prominent educators, opinions which do not reflect true aspects of education in France today. Among characteristic features which should at least be known are the high quality and devotion of teachers in the nursery schools; the real preoccupation at the elementary education level with development of individual thinking, and in the "Lycées" the wholly new conception of discipline, studies, and teacher-pupil relations promoted in the "*classes nouvelles*."

The complete centralization of our school system, instead of restricting our freedom, helps to make plain and rational the general plan of studies. One of its consequences is that the same salaries are paid to all of the teachers at the same level throughout the country—a practice which proves of real help in keeping first-class teachers in rural districts.

So great are the differences between what I have seen here and what I was used to, that I found myself re-examining conceptions which I previously had taken for granted. More than once it was not only your unusually strong coffee that kept me awake. I really was feeling worried by doubts and problems. Here are some of the many things I asked myself:

¶To build a personality, which is the real aim of education, is it enough to en-

able children to live in the best physical environment and to give them plenty of opportunities for good social adjustment? The experience of the war showed us that even for families whose high social standards seemed secure, hunger, cold, and fear can become desperately real. If the solid foundations of personal, critical thought had not been firmly laid at an early age, would our people have been able to resist so strongly the propaganda and to reject the slogans of Nazism?

¶How is it that the same American educators who are so well informed on the psychology of infants and adolescents appear to take so little interest in the development of the child from seven to twelve; years which are so important for the beginning of objective and rational thought, years in which the child becomes familiar with those abstractions which make up the framework of our scientific interaction of the world; years in which the foundations of a real mental discipline are laid?

¶What will be the effects on the adolescents of the transition from school life so highly sheltered, cooperative, and friendly, to an adult life which seems to "to be so sternly competitive? May they not suffer a psychological shock which may affect their whole inner being?

Such reflections give only a small idea of the intense interest which this trip has stimulated in me. On leaving I can only express my gratitude and the sincere hope that I may come again—both to see those still unknown parts of your country which so much appeal to me, and to revisit the places and the people who have meant so much to me.—*Helene Brûlé*

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they needed to clear up their reading difficulties.

All of these factors suggested by research have direct implications for planning children's reading experiences and are being used in part by schools throughout the land. The quality of our reading

instruction has risen generation by generation. With moderately-sized classes and adequate help for those who find reading difficult, we can carry the success of reading clinics into the everyday classroom and reach a point where there is almost no child who "can't read."

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