

Research in Review

Beginning Reading Research: A Reflection of Social Reality?

James B. Macdonald

THIS year the U.S. Office of Education is funding a major effort to improve our knowledge and understanding about beginning reading. Twenty-seven projects have been financed at the expenditure of close to one million dollars. Further, these 27 projects are being coordinated at the University of Minnesota under the leadership of Guy Bond and Robert Dykstra. Though each project has its own unique problem and internal integrity, common data are being collected from all projects and analyzed at the Minnesota Center.

The problems being studied range widely. Various methods of teaching word attack skills, varieties of language arts approaches, aspects and programs of individualized reading, teaching English as a second language, teaching the culturally disadvantaged, the role of teacher supervisors, readiness, and audio-visual materials: are indicative of the range of the studies. A list of the titles and project directors is included at the end of this research column.

With few exceptions the emphasis is upon methodology, although most studies explore other factors within this basic methodological format. Horn (4), for example, is comparing the effectiveness of three methods of developing reading readiness in Spanish-speaking children. Intensive English aural-oral instruction will be compared with intensive Spanish

aural-oral procedures and a non-intensive aural-oral control group. Reading advancement at the end of first grade will be examined for significant differences.

Ruddell (18) is examining four first grade programs with varying emphasis upon the regularity of grapheme-phoneme correspondence and relation of language structure to meaning. A secondary consideration will be the study of the relation of selected language and background variables to reading achievement in the four programs.

Each of these illustrates a program or method approach allied with an attempt to examine other relevant factors within the setting of methodology.

As exciting as the promise of these 27 efforts may be, there are some rather glaring omissions of significant emphasis among the selected projects. Perhaps most notable among these is the area of children's predispositions to learn in a beginning reading program.

Recent concern over culturally disadvantaged youngsters has brought much previously latent knowledge about learning in school programs to the surface of our consciousness and has added some new data. The most striking awareness is the critical importance of the preschool period on children's learning in formal settings.

Benjamin Bloom's (2) recent book, *Stability and Change in Human Charac-*

teristics, documents this point well. If one takes Bloom's discussion seriously, as Bruno Bettelheim has (1), in his review of the book, then one is confronted with a quandary from which various methods of teaching reading at the first grade level do not seem to be of direct relevance.

Essentially, what is suggested is that *anything* done as late as first grade to help children become "good" achievers in school is of considerably less importance than experiences which have already preceded these. Reports of studies examining increases in either levels of intelligence or general achievement as a result of changed environmental conditions during the elementary school years do not provide an optimistic basis for methodological studies.

These reports do indeed suggest that reading is a social skill but in a sense that implies that the context of the beginning reading program may have little to do with the success of the child. These reports, instead, possibly indicate the cruciality of the socialization processes initiated and developed long before the age of six.

One is reminded of George H. Mead's *Mind, Self and Society* at this point. Whatever the socialization process entails, the use of language at very early ages apparently helps to develop an internalized self system which may or may not be amenable to formalized language learning tasks at later dates. Failure to learn to read, for example, might just as well be explained as resulting from the defensive use of language by the self system; as it might be explained by failure to experience appropriate sound training in a beginning reading program.

In any case reading does appear to be a sort of formal capstone language behavior in our social milieu. Reading is

definitely not the "beginning" of much of anything as language behavior, but seems to be closer to the end in terms of the problem of language and socialization.

It is perhaps time to drop our parochial methodological approach to conceptualizing instruction and social relationships within the classroom, and to examine the process of learning to read in the context of the socialization process.

For example, such questions as the following may be more productive avenues of investigation: What social conditions are necessary for the free and flexible development of language behavior? What status and role perceptions and competencies need to be internalized for language learning?

The explanation of our failures in teaching children to read may not turn out to be rationalizations after all. When children *are not* "ready" or *are* "immature" or *have* "emotional problems" or *appear* "dull" or "apathetic and unmotivated"; the use of individualized reading methods, or language experiences, or a basal program or initial teaching alphabets, or what have you, may turn out to be best likened to fighting a fire with a water pistol.

These interesting and worthy endeavors may turn out to be examples of well intentioned efforts applied at the wrong time and place. We may yet have to face the basic issue of whether a statistically significant difference—say 2.3 months at the end of first grade between two groups of thirty children—is an experientially significant difference. That is, does this really make any difference in the long run or is it primarily an artifact of our desires, methods and efforts?

Much of the research proposed in the beginning reading studies listed at the end of this column could have been done

five, ten, or fifteen years ago. As one peruses the titles of the studies, it becomes evident that there are few surprises there. Either we are lacking in imagination or there is little if any historical awareness in our research efforts. Further, there is hardly anything here which could be called basic research in the field.

Educators may well have to rejuvenate the unfashionable concern for a broader responsibility of the school. As much as we would like to be left alone to work within the four walls of the schoolroom, we may have to reopen the unpopular but perhaps crucial concern for the broader context of curriculum.

At the moment, we have at least three alternatives. We may continue to do the best we can after children arrive at school. We can try to get children into school at an earlier age. Or, we can begin again to involve ourselves in the business of social reconstruction. No matter which approach we follow, the results are going to be messy from one viewpoint or another. Nevertheless, perhaps we ought to realize by this time that there are no easy solutions to dilemmas of the human condition—including methodological solutions.

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13. Russell G. Stauffer. University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware. "Effectiveness of a Language Arts and a Basic Reader Approach to First-Grade Reading."
14. William D. Sheldon. Syracuse University, Syracuse, N. Y. "Effect of First-Grade Instruction Using Basal Readers, Modified Linguistic Materials, and Linguistic Readers."
15. Harry T. Hahn. Oakland Schools, Michigan, Department of Public Instruction, Lansing, Michigan. "Relative Effectiveness of Three Methods of Teaching Reading in Grade One."
16. Robert B. Hayes. Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. "Factors Affecting Learning to Read."
17. Hale C. Reid. Cedar Rapids Public Schools, State University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa. "Effect of Different Approaches of Initial Instruction on the Reading Achievement of a Selected Group of First-Grade Children."

Cooperative Research Grants for Beginning Reading Studies

3. William Kendrick. San Diego County Department of Education, San Diego, California. "Comparative Study of Two First-Grade Language Arts Programs."

4. Thomas D. Horn. University of Texas,

18. Robert B. Ruddell. University of California, Berkeley, California. "Four First-Grade Reading Programs with Varying Emphasis on Regularity of Grapheme-Phoneme Correspondences and Relation of Language Structure to Meaning."

19. Olive S. Niles and Helen N. Theinert. Springfield Public Schools, Massachusetts. Department of Education, Boston, Mass. "Evaluation of Three Methods of Teaching First-Grade Reading to Children Likely to Have Difficulty with Reading."

20. Katherine A. Morrill. University of Hartford, Hartford, Connecticut. "Comparison of Two Methods of Reading Supervision."

21. Arthur W. Heilman. Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Penn. "Effects of an In-Service Program on First-Grade Reading Achievement."

22. N. H. Shope. Goldsboro Public Schools, North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, No. Carolina. "Evaluating Three Methods of Teaching First-Grade Reading."

23. Harold J. Tanyzer. Hofstra University, Hempstead, N. Y. "Effectiveness of Three Reading Systems on First-Grade Reading Achievements."

24. Jeanne S. Chall and Shirley C. Feldmann. City University of New York, New York, N. Y. "Study in Depth of First-Grade Reading."

25. Donald L. Cleland. University of Pittsburgh, Penna. "Comparison of the Basal and the Coordinated Language-Experience Approaches in First-Grade Reading Instruction."

26. Roy McCanne. Colorado State Department of Education, Denver. "Approaches to First-Grade English Reading Instruction for Children from Spanish-Speaking Homes."

27. Nita M. Wyatt. University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas. "Reading Achievements of First-Grade Boys Versus First-Grade Girls."

28. George D. Space and Hazen Curtis. Florida State Department of Education, Tallahassee, Florida. "Longitudinal First-Grade Reading Readiness Program."

29. Edward Fry. Rutgers University, New Brunswick, N.J. "First-Grade Reading Instruction Using a Diacritical Marking System, the Initial Teaching Alphabet, and a Basal Series."

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A good way to study a word of more than one syllable



CABBAGE

1. Pronounce the word to yourself.



CAB BAGE

2. Listen for the number of syllables.



cab bage

3. Write the word by syllables and add the accent mark.



'cab bage

4. Study each syllable.



'cab bage

5. Write the entire word as you think of it by syllables.

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