

Whatever Happened to Reading?

MARY JO WOODFIN*

PERHAPS the 1970's will at last bring about more productive efforts to teach children to read, after a decade in which new "breakthroughs" in finding fool-proof (read *teacher-proof*) ways of teaching reading were frantically sought. The past few years seemed characterized by: every issue of every journal related to reading announcing a new miracle way of teaching reading, usually using the author's materials, of course; much of our energy being used in finding those miraculous inventions/methods/materials/processes/approaches/accountabilities for improving reading instruction; new methods and materials being described enthusiastically in the popular press, followed quickly by the next new "way, truth, and the light"; and public relations programs resulting in much spending for materials and equipment, which as often as not remained in the storeroom.

All this frenzy of activity had some negative results. Often teachers felt a lack of trust in their abilities, this lack evidenced by legislative restriction, parental pressure, child resistance, and teacher feelings of inadequacy. Much material was bought, then discarded as the tide ebbed for that particular enthusiasm. Teachers and administrators engaged in tremendous efforts (and lengthy workshops) to be on top of each new trend in reading, much to various consultants' delight and improved checkbook balance, until

the next expert with a new magical way appeared. Many educators learned to ride out the storm by using currently accepted phrases, materials, jargons, and processes, while continuing to work as they wished.

These negative side effects and displaced thrusts had positive results as well. Efforts to individualize instruction were made, many successfully; linguistic approaches, for all the hassle about type, clarifications, role of linguistics and thought, and which new books to use (those with or without answers for the teachers), were tried and some retained; phonetic approaches once again became acceptable, both in i/t/a and in traditional orthography (if indeed they had ever left); and many school districts made tremendous gains in the use of creative reading experiences with older children. Most of these gains resulted from relearning again and again the naïve truth: quality of reading programs never rises above the quality of instruction.

Individualized Instruction

Individualized instruction came through a series of steps from independent reading groups, self selection methods, team teach-

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ing processes (as often as not the old departmentalization idea reworked or a cheap way to construct school buildings), uses of various i/t/a and traditional orthography approaches, language approach to reading, through teachers hopefully (haphazardly?) choosing the method or approach that best suited the child (or the teacher), to more sophisticated approaches to diagnosis.

Diagnosis expanded to include: (a) teaching by appraising learning style or assigning the child to the teacher with whom he works best, as at Top of the World School, Laguna Beach, California; (b) diagnosing and working in the classroom on sensorimotor dysfunctions, as pioneered by Port Hueneme and Goleta Union school districts in California; (c) working specifically on self-concept of the child in relation to self as reader, while providing choices for him in some of the methods to be used in reading, as in Project ME in Santa Ana, California; (d) and in a comprehensive, diagnostic-prescriptive program developed by the staff at Lincoln Demonstration School in the Paramount Unified School District, Paramount, California.

Student-adult ratios were lowered as a part of some of these more successful projects in individualization, by college cooperation in staff development and the use of teacher aides, as in the Lincoln Demonstration Center in Paramount; the Los Nietos project for research in teacher education at Santa Fe Springs, California; and the Westminster High School Title I program, Westminster, California.

Instructional media were a successful part of individualization in such districts as the Oxnard High School Title I projects, the Melbourne High School experimental program in Florida, the Westminster High School projects, and the Philadelphia project.

Linguistic Approaches

Much uproar, confusion, and surprisingly exciting gains in reading instruction followed the various "linguistic wars" of the recent past. True, these wars and feuds seem forever with us. In the hope that the

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reader has suffered enough discussion of the various schools, thoughts, vocabularies, approaches, and histories of the linguistic movement, let us concentrate on the gains.

Both a hindrance and a gain was the fact that most linguists preferred to be considered as scientists. Other than some textbook attempts to convert theory to practice (Roberts, for instance) and help from people such as Sullivan, Postman and Weingarten, Terry Borton, and, surprisingly enough, Paul Torrance and Calvin Taylor, the educator was mercifully (unmercifully?) alone to struggle to convert theory into practice. This left many teachers in their usual spot, dead center, while others went ahead creating new uses for the linguistic materials commercially available, or developing their own. Unfortunately the "Dead Centers" far outnumbered the "Innovators," and the communication problem between educator and linguist remains (perhaps for the better).

This encounter between scientist and teacher, between theory and practice, resulted in many gains in addition to the confusions, hastily assembled workshops, and faking previously noted:

1. Other English dialects, especially Black dialects, gained respectability in the schools as part of the reading program. Although there was a rush to teach Black dialect exclusively in some areas, this tendency has largely disappeared as a result of parental pressure for their children to learn, use, and appreciate many speech patternings; the implications for social mobility of certain speech patternings; and the surprising (to some) discovery that there is no single Black dialect, as such, just as there is no single white dialect.

2. Teachers began to see that the lan-

guage one uses shapes the thinking process of the individual and affects his understanding of what he reads. Some of the intensive studies of American Indian language patterns gave impetus here.

3. More attention was focused on language as behavior. Reading was perceived as a behavioral process (in both the human interaction and behavioral modification sense), and the way one learns and uses reading indicates much concerning him as an individual and learner.

4. More extensive use of inquiry as a way of teaching reading came from the linguists' insistence on the scientific approach to reading. Challenging, questioning, and evaluating differing sources became more common.

5. Reading in the schools was considered less of a mechanical tool and more of an important mode of communication among people, resulting from the work at the School of Language and Linguistics of the Foreign Service Institute.

Phonetic Approaches and i/t/a

Although phonics never really left us as a method for teaching reading, recent developments have made its use more acceptable. Structurally devised reading books based on sound or linguistic classification methods are in common use. Instructional devices such as the Language Master, which enables a reader to hear and see a word or sound at the same time, abound. Tests to designate preferred learning patternings, verbal or visual, have been developed by this author, among others. Information about auditory learning styles, such as the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistics Ability provides, is more commonly available and helps teachers use

Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1974	March 9-13	Anaheim	Anaheim Convention Center
1975	March 15-19	New Orleans	Rivergate
1976	March 14-17	Miami Beach	Convention Center
1977	March 5-9	Detroit	Cobo Hall

auditory means for teaching reading in more sophisticated and productive ways.

The i/t/a tide has surged and receded and reappeared again and again, sometimes within the same district. As population turnover, parental dissatisfaction, lack of material, spelling problems, and drop in initial teacher enthusiasm cause pressures, i/t/a seems to disappear for a while. One excited principal or teacher can cause its reintroduction and be elated anew at the amount and colorfulness of stories children can produce and read under this method. More and more interesting materials are being produced for those who recognize this as a solution to their particular instructional problems.

Reading with Older Children

Some of the more exciting innovations in reading instruction are taking place at junior and senior high levels. For instance, drop-out rates have decreased significantly in both the Westminster and Oxnard High Schools in their Title I programs for minorities and poor whites. Student self-report evidence would suggest that unusual uses of materials, meaningful applicability of materials to the student's life, intensive diagnostic profile work, and self design of learning patterning have aided here. Some ways used to improve reading at upper levels include:

1. Use of non-textbook materials including dress pattern books, fashion magazines, drivers' manuals and tests, new car manuals, and motorcycle books.

2. The teaching of poetry through the use of music (where words and/or music are written by individuals and groups) helps this age level appreciate the poetry they encounter most today—words of songs.

3. Becoming an instructor part of the time, either in cross-age groups or in one's own classroom, improves reading skills.

4. Creative use of media, including video tape recorders for student productions, dictaphones for writing stories, and various still and movie camera projects all increase student interest in reading.

In addition to relevance, creative ideas,

and diagnostic work, the more realistic recognition of the problems of pregnant girls has reduced dropouts and aided the establishment of a more satisfying curriculum in reading at upper levels.

Innovation in Reading

After the fad status of i/t/a, linguistics, and certain processes in individualized instruction filtered down to a more usable level (and as other fads bloom, then make a more realistic contribution to teaching), we are beginning to say and mean that not all students learn alike and not all teachers teach alike. Simple and self-evident as this seems, faddism in teaching reading, even (or maybe more especially) some methods of individualizing instruction, have tended in recent years to put students into molds, shaped by currently popular school building designs. Perhaps now we will be more willing to realize that any method will teach some children to read and that no one method will teach all. Let us hope we have learned some simple lessons from the turmoil in reading in the recent past:

1. The teacher is usually more successful teaching the reading method(s) he believes to be best.

2. Student learning styles can be identified and used in reading instruction.

3. Attention to student and teacher self-concept may be more productive in teaching reading than any new method.

4. Self choice in learning methods usually succeeds better than forced choice, both for teacher and student.

5. In-service methods designed to help teachers look at self have often resulted in concrete, significant increases in results from standardized reading tests, as the teacher is better able to look at and accept what the student really is, not what the teacher wishes him to be, thus relieving one pressure on much-pressured students.

6. The strength modality of diagnosis and remediation, where students learn through their strengths instead of concentrating on their weaknesses, works quite well for most students. □

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