

# Is Johnny's/Mary's Reading Getting Worse?

Roger Farr

*This researcher finds that Johnny's/Mary's basic skills are improving at the lower levels and have been over a long period of time. Yet we should be concerned at how effectively higher order reading comprehension abilities are being developed at the lower levels.*

"What's wrong with our schools? Why don't they teach students to read?"

"Kids can't read, write, or spell today!"

"High school students don't read because they don't know how. In my day we . . ."

How justified are these often-repeated criticisms of our schools? Certainly they reflect a real concern that shouldn't—and can't—be ignored. If students aren't learning to read as well as they used to, we need to do something about it. But first, we need to determine how well our children do read—in urban schools and small-town and rural schools, in the different areas of the country, and at all grade levels. If the teaching of reading is as weak as some of the critics proclaim, it must be improved. Even if we are making significant inroads on improving the situation, we must do better. We should ask: "Are students learning to read? How well? Are students learning to read better than in the past? What can we do to improve the effectiveness of reading programs? Where do we start?"

To answer these questions we must agree on what we mean by reading and thus agree on a unified goal. Such agreement will come from the knowledge and understanding of the reading process, how it is best developed, and what the problems of developing it effectively are. If we begin our quest for the answers by measuring the achievement of children, it is vital that we use assessments that match our goals.

## Declining SAT Scores

Numerous articles in the popular press and professional journals have called attention to the alarming decline of high school students' scores on the SAT and ACT tests. Many of these

articles have stated that if high school juniors and seniors are performing less well on college aptitude tests, then all scholastic achievement in the schools—especially reading ability—must be on the decline. The public concern with reading achievement in our schools that has arisen because of such articles has not been keener since the publication of Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955.<sup>1</sup>

Several points suggest only a very limited and cautious use of SAT and ACT scores as an indication of the general achievement of all children in our schools or of declining scores on these tests as a springboard for criticizing the effectiveness of reading education.

- First, the results of college entrance exams cannot be generalized to all children. The population that takes these tests is made up of students who intend to go to college and who are able to pay the fee to take the tests.

- The fact that in recent years this population has increased in size and has become somewhat more heterogeneous raises a second important consideration. This increase is due to the advent of open enrollment in more institutions of higher learning and to the decreasing dropout rate over the past 20 years in most high schools. This means that more young persons with a broader range of abilities consider college and take the entrance tests. When the current scores on such tests are compared to those from years preceding the influence of such factors, some decline in scores might logically be expected.

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Flesch. *Why Johnny Can't Read & What You Can Do About It*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1955.

• Third, college entrance exams are designed to assess how well students will do with the academic tasks of college, and they are not designed to measure general achievement. Specifically, these tests are not designed to measure basic reading ability, and, in fact, the tests assume a basic reading level for anyone taking them.

All of this does not mean that the decline of average scores of the SAT and ACT tests should not be a topic of study. There are good reasons to study these test results and to look for the reasons that students are not doing as well on them as they did in the past. But these tests do not provide us with basic information about how

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well students read and whether they are learning to read better or worse than in the past.

### Reading Achievement: Then and Now

The status of reading achievement in the United States cannot simply be labeled "good" or "bad" or "improved" or "declining." Such achievement is a complex and constantly changing picture, but we can make some definite statements about its present status:

1. If, in observing changes in children's reading achievement, we consider a period of at least 30 years—from 1946 to 1976—there is no question that on the average students read better today than in the past.

2. If we consider a relatively short period—say 1970 to 1976—then it appears that students in the lower grades read better than their 1970 counterparts. However, at the upper grade levels, students in 1976 are not reading any better on the average than those in 1970. They may, in fact, be reading less well.

3. In general, students at the lower grade levels are scoring very high on basic skills tests

in reading. There is some indication that this is the result of the heavy emphasis on specific reading skills encouraged by federally-funded reading projects.

4. Almost all students in the United States do achieve a minimal level of reading literacy. However, at higher levels of reading literacy—such as inferential reading—the performance of high school students is declining.

### Changes Over Several Decades

A comprehensive summary of research studies and an analysis of reports of state and city testing programs was reported by Jaap Tuinman, Michael Rowls, and Roger Farr in 1974.<sup>2</sup> The studies in our report compared data related to average performance on reading tests in the past to performance at some subsequent time. From an initial review of hundreds of studies, 50 which met criteria that indicated they were adequately reliable were selected for intensive study. The overwhelming conclusion was that in almost every study, students achieved a higher average score when tested at the later time than the score achieved at the first testing.

The conclusions of the researchers whose findings were reported in our survey are rather consistent and are represented by the following summarizations:

• In a study of reading achievement before and after 1945, Tiegs (1949) found that, "It is safe to conclude that the achievement of public school pupils is not falling; in fact, the data show a slight, although probably not statistically significant, gain in achievement."

• Finch and Gillenwater (1949) analyzed the test results of Springfield, Missouri, sixth graders in 1931 compared to 1948. They concluded that "the resulting scores of the two groups of pupils show that in the schools being studied the average sixth grader of 1948 is a slightly better reader than the average sixth grader of 1931."

<sup>2</sup> Roger Farr, Jaap Tuinman, and Michael Rowls. *Reading Achievement in the United States: Then and Now*. Prepared for Educational Testing Service under Contract OEC-71-3713 by the Reading Program Center of the Institute for Child Study. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University, August 1974.

• Partlow (1955) studied the reading achievement of pupils in grades five through eight in St. Catherines, Canada. The two dates for his comparison were 1933 and 1953. Partlow concluded: "The total evidence reveals clearly that there was no decline in reading standards in St. Catherines' Public Schools, but rather that there was a significant overall improvement at the end of the period."

• In the process of renorming the four batteries of the Gates Reading Test, Gates (1961) studied reading achievement in 1937 compared to 1957. The conclusion Gates drew from his data was that "a conservative estimate is that today's children achieve, after five years attendance in elementary schools, a level of reading ability that is better than half a year in advance of the pupils of equivalent intelligence, age, and other related factors 20 years ago."

In addition to analyzing and summarizing studies that examined the average reading achievement of students over time, our survey collected and analyzed the results of the reading assessment programs of those states and cities from which we could obtain usable and reliable results. We stated in our report that some of the most reliable data were reported by the state of Iowa and by the Independent School Survey scores. In both cases we have long-term information over roughly 25 years. The two sets of information reinforce each other and the major conclusion to be drawn is that between 1940 and 1965, there was a steady improvement in reading achievement. Overall, the 1965 students outscored their 1940 counterparts significantly. Our study concluded that over the most recent years there does seem to be a slight decline in reading achievement at the upper grade levels, while reading achievement at the lower grade levels appears to continue to increase.

### More Recent Changes

One possibility is that this recent decline in test scores at the upper grade levels may be true only for students in city school districts. However, the results of the most recent testing by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) would seem to dispute this. These results compared the reading abilities of students

in the 1970-71 school year to those of students in 1974-75. The results show that nine-year-olds have improved significantly in overall reading ability. Thirteen-year-olds showed little change in overall reading achievement between the 1970-71 testing and the 1974-75 testing. On the other hand, seventeen-year-olds showed a slight, but not significant decline between the two testing times.

As an evaluator of the reading programs in several large school districts across the country, I have observed this same pattern in the results of the testing programs. Reading test scores at the lower grade levels continue to improve while

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test scores at the upper grade levels seem to be declining.

### Basic Skill Achievement Is Improving

One of the most significant increases in reading achievement for students at the lower grade levels appears to be in the basic word recognition area. In reviewing the reading tests used at the lower grade levels, one is struck with the fact that these tests look quite different from those used at the upper grade levels. It is not just that the type face is larger. The lower level tests include a much greater emphasis on such skills as matching letters with sounds, dividing words into syllables, and matching letters and word shapes. At the upper grade levels, reading tests are almost totally devoid of these types of exercises and usually include test items covering only reading vocabulary and reading comprehension. The point is that what is measured as "reading" at the lower grade levels is different from what is measured as "reading" at the upper grade levels. That the tests used for lower levels emphasize basic word recognition skills may explain the dif-

ference in the achievement pattern between those lower grades and the upper levels.

The analysis of the reading test results of a number of school districts supports the conclusion that basic word recognition is increasing at the primary grade levels. The results of the *Metropolitan Reading Readiness* test in one large school district showed almost no first-grade students below the third stanine. The cause for this may be difficult to isolate, but again it seems almost certainly to be, at least in part, the result of the heavy emphasis on teaching word recognition skills in the numerous federally-funded supplementary reading programs. Many of these programs consist almost entirely of a teacher aide working with the poorest readers on drill-type programs in order to teach students basic word recognition skills. When students have mastered these basic skills, they are almost certainly better test takers—if the tests measure word recognition skills. It is important to ask, however, whether they may also be turned off by reading. For them, learning to read has been primarily drill with little emphasis on developing concepts from what they read or on the use of reading as an essential part of their everyday lives. We will need to come back to this point.

If the reading achievement of upper grade students is going down, isn't there some justification to the claims that many who graduate from high school haven't mastered the reading ability necessary to function in everyday life—basic literacy? Of course, the answer to that question depends on what is meant by "basic literacy"; but again the NAEP results do provide the basis for a quite positive outlook on basic literacy.

### A Basic Literacy Level in the United States

The NAEP reading tests included test items such as the following in which students were asked to follow directions, complete forms, or answer literal comprehension questions after reading a short selection. The results for these questions are quite interesting.

On an item equivalent<sup>3</sup> to the item following, seventeen-year-olds scored very high on all five parts: 93.6, 94.0, 92.9, 92.7, and 94.0 percent of the respondents got each of the five questions correct. In all but one of these, in which there

was three-tenths of a percent drop, the percentages were up from four years earlier.

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#### **WORLD WIDE EXCURSIONS**

*An Equal Opportunity Employer*

For the first three questions, the examinees had to write their answers. Percent of seventeen-year-olds (in school and out) who got this item correct:

1. What company is offering the job?  
93.6% correct

2. What kinds of jobs are being offered?  
94% correct

3. Give two qualifications that are required for this job. 92.9% correct

4. What is the top salary after six weeks of training? 92.7% correct

\_\_\_\_\_ \$450 a month

\_\_\_\_\_ \$775 a month

\_\_\_\_\_ \$304 a month

\_\_\_\_\_ \$725 a month

\_\_\_\_\_ I don't know

<sup>3</sup> Because the test items are not to be publicly released, specifics in the actual item are changed here.

5. How should you apply for the job if you live in Kansas City? 94% correct

- \_\_\_\_\_ Send a telegram to WWE
- \_\_\_\_\_ Talk to Mr. Overland personally
- \_\_\_\_\_ Call Mr. Overland on the phone
- \_\_\_\_\_ Write Mr. Overland a letter
- \_\_\_\_\_ I don't know

Questions based on still another help wanted ad also drew percentage correct responses for seventeen-year-olds in the high 90's—one was 97.7 percent and another 98.7 percent.

On an item that presented a personal check made out and signed, a question asking who would receive the money was answered correctly by 97.3 percent of those 17-year-olds questioned; and one asking the reader to find the number of the check was answered correctly by 93.3 percent. This fill-in-the-blank answer had to be selected from the sample, which also contained figures corresponding to the date, amount, the account number, and a code number.

In still another item, the instructions to perform a magic trick were interspersed in a relatively long selection. The first step was not numbered and began a paragraph with the phrase, "Tie one end of the black thread . . ." The paragraph followed a general introductory paragraph. Five instruction steps (all unnumbered) followed. On being asked to identify the first step in performing the trick, 94.2 percent of the seventeen-year-olds and 88.3 percent of the thirteen-year-olds answered correctly.

These test items do not just represent isolated results from the NAEP data. Similar results are found on a number of test items that appear to be assessing very basic reading literacy.

The percentages of students getting these items correct are impressive especially when you consider that the NAEP test population is a randomly-selected sample covering the entire country. Anytime the percentage of students getting an item correct is over 90 percent, we can conclude that the skill measured by that item has been mastered by almost the entire population from which the test sample is drawn. Achieving 100 percent is almost never possible because some students get a test item wrong by chance; and this is, of course, why test scores and test items are not perfectly reliable.

## Interpret Results Cautiously

What all this means is that one needs to be cautious in interpreting the measurements now available. Comparing results across years and across broad ranges of grade levels gives only shaky indication of whether Johnny or Mary can read and of whether each is improving as a reader or getting worse.

To determine this intelligently, we must first decide what we mean by reading. If we accept the definition of *basic reading literacy* at a very minimal level, Johnny is improving markedly as a reader at all levels. If by reading we mean a command of basic word recognition skills, it appears Johnny has been improving slightly and continuously over a long period of time at the lower levels. But we cannot use this definition of reading to interpret the decline of SAT and ACT scores to mean Johnny is getting worse at the higher levels, because those basics are not what those tests measure. We would have to test high school readers on the basics to determine that; and we should test the whole universe—not just the college-bound. But the results of that measurement would have to be compared to the results of a like measurement of the same universe from some earlier years.

If the kind of conceptual understanding that involves inference drawing is what we mean by reading, we have cause for concern with the declining college entrance exam scores. But it would appear illogical to attach that concern to a criticism that "the schools aren't teaching the basics of reading." It *might*, on the other hand, be appropriate to couple the concern about current SAT and ACT scores to a concern about whether the recent emphasis on the basics at the lower grade levels is starving out the kind of conceptual teaching of reading that the college entrance exams measure at the higher levels. Indications are that children at lower grade levels are, at least, not scoring lower on inference questions.

Deciding what we mean by reading, then, and developing and administering measurements of that at all levels over a long period of time is a logical way to begin to determine how successful we are at teaching reading. Meanwhile, it appears that Johnny's basic skills are improving noticeably at the lower levels and have been over a

long period of time. It appears that we have reason to be concerned that Johnny's ability to use the more advanced levels of reading comprehension is declining at the higher grade levels and to extend that concern to how effectively those higher order reading comprehension abilities are being developed at the lower levels. This concern about the decline in college entrance exams scores, however, needs to be tempered by the realization that the decrease may result from the fact that the students tested today value a more democratic universe than that of former years from which the scores for the comparison come.

Finally, if we are concerned about national "basic literacy," we can forge ahead seeking improvement confident that we are doing quite well.

All of these concerns, of course, are important. That citizenry should be able to read well enough to function in everyday life is an essential but minimal expectation. The basic reading skills are essential to the development of the higher order comprehension skills, which enable the reader to enjoy and exploit written communication in the fullest sense. Understanding the interrelationship of these goals is the surest foundation for an evaluation of how well we are teaching reading and of how to improve that effort.

*FL*

#### References

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