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Reading Research — some conceptual issues

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> All these questions arise, and more; to try and do'research into reading' without considering them properly is just crazy — we wouldn't know what research we were doing.
>
> — John Wilson.

INTRODUCTION

The views in this paper are in no way definitive. They are largely the result of my own research conducted at the Rhodes University Reading Centre. This was to survey and analyse data collected by the Centre. Some four hundred files were available each giving information on:

(i) School children who were at the time of research undergoing 'treatment'

(ii) School children who had already been 'treated' at the Centre.

Only 187 of the files were suitable for research purposes but this in no way detracted from the relevance of some of the material gathered.
It is the purpose of this paper to isolate one aspect of the research in question. My aim is to discuss, albeit briefly, a few of the misunderstandings which arose, and might well still arise, amongst teachers, testers and clinicians regarding the question of reading disability.

The nature of the issues in this paper are philosophical. The term 'philosophical' is here to be construed as involving critical reflection. Such an activity involves a critical self reflection regarding our assumptions, beliefs and attitudes concerning children and the nature of their specific 'problems'. This section, moreover, has been included in the hope that those who are concerned with the present problem will transcend what Popper (1971) aptly called the 'dogmatic attitude'. This attitude is to be viewed as prevalent among social scientists and those presently being initiated into these disciplines. It entails an uncritical acceptance of some of their social 'scientific' statements. Moreover, it also includes those who are uncritical of the labels they impose on children in order to 'explain' their behaviour. As Goldberg and Schiffman (1972) point out:

> It is not only teachers, but reading clinicians as well, who often use terms such as 'emotional block', 'anxious parents', and 'brain damage' to dismiss a problem that they do not understand.

While it would be an oversimplification to explain this attitude simply in terms of a human emotional need to find an explanation at all costs, there does seem some truth in the above assertion. Popper (1971) describes this attitude succinctly as follows:

> It was first in animals and children, but later also in adults, that I observed the immensely powerful need for regularity — the need which makes them seek for regularities; which makes them sometimes experience regularities even when there are none; which makes them cling to their expectations dogmatically; and which makes them unhappy and may drive them to despair and to the verge of madness if certain assumed regularities break down.

While this 'need for regularity' may be difficult to transcend in general it should be the serious concern of those who work with children. The loose application of social scientific concepts to a child is a case in point. Often these concepts, ('reading problems' for example) are imposed simply to gain a sense of regularity and to avoid further concern with the problem. More often, however, these concepts may have no real validity in respect of the child. Moreover, what is often overlooked in this respect is the fact that by loosely employing such concepts and theoretical explanations to account for a particular child's behaviour or 'problem' the person imputing the concepts overlooks that these concepts or explanations may only be tentative in nature. The possibility of this 'reality' influencing the child's self concept is marked. As Thomas (1937) points out: ". . . if men define situations as real they are real in their consequences".

Recent studies by social psychologists who have examined this aspect more closely have presented convincing arguments to suggest that the child's self concept may be markedly influenced by the evaluations of those in close contact with him. (Mead, 1934; Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968; Pidgeon, 1970). More specifically related to the concept of 'reading problem' per se, Pumphrey and Dixon (1970) argue that the attitude of the teacher to the child's problem is positively related to the latter's reading attainment. The point of the matter is, perhaps, lucidly summed up by John Holt (1965):

> Given no chance to find out who he is, and to develop that person, whoever it is, *he soon comes to accept the adult's evaluation of him.* (My emphasis.)

At this point a few examples from the research to illustrate the considerations discussed so far would be useful:

(i) One parent made the following comment concerning her child: "It took me six months to teach him to spell 'brain', 'concert' and 'took' correctly. He was impossible and as far as I am concerned he is careless!"

Of course in many respects the mother's comment is understandable. Many parents are exceptionally keen to assist their children in reading and related areas. However, owing to their lack of understanding of, say, 'reading' they are inclined to cause more harm than good. The label of 'careless' in this case was imposed upon the child and this was paralleled by a teacher who had forwarded a report on the particular child. In reality this

label was inadequate and served only to avoid a closer understanding of the child's particular problem. In actual fact the child urgently needed training in phonics.

(ii) Of the 187 files examined 23 (either parents or teachers) employed the term 'dyslexia' to 'explain' the particular child's 'problem'. On closer examination of the files in question it was found that none of these children warranted such a diagnosis.

(iii) Related to the above point is the fact that many of those concerned with the children at the Centre employed the term 'reading problem' unthinkingly. Moreover it did seem that many found cause to employ the term 'reading problem' because the child indicated a score below his 'reading age'.

In order to clarify the issues raised in (ii) and (iii) the two related issues of 'dyslexia' and 'reading problem/age' will be discussed briefly below.

II

DYSLEXIA AND RELATED CONCEPTS

It was pointed out above that the concept of 'dyslexia' had been used indiscriminately by many teachers, parents and testers. Reid (1968) argues that the issue is mainly one of communication and that this lack of communication has resulted from the inability of the various researchers concerned with the problem to transcend the particular limits of their disciplines. This lack of communication can only do more harm than good.

Failure to communicate adequately the nature of dyslexia is, in the light of more recent evidence, an unfortunate state of affairs. It was argued earlier, for instance, that given the social psychological studies concerning the effects of imposing labels on children and the influence this might have on their subsequent achievement, one would have to be more careful in future. Indeed, in some cases the term 'dyslexia' has become a convenient label for a child whose problem is not as serious as the term suggests. The term 'reading problem' may also be misleading. As the medical researchers Goldberg and Schiffman (1972) point out:

> 'Larger groups of children have been regarded as dyslexic who might well be included in the low educable category. . .'

And later they argued:

> The tendency to label all reading problems as dyslexia is erroneous.

It would seem, then, that it is not only our assumptions concerning 'dyslexia' per se which are in need of clarification but also our assumptions concerning what constitutes a 'reading problem'. It is evident, for example, that if 'dyslexia' ought to be placed into a different 'educable category' then implied in this statement is the assumption that more than one type of 'reading problem' exists.

In order to illustrate this point, the tables below are relevant:

TABLE I

READING AGE (N=187)

DESCRIPTION	N	Percent
Not known	2	1,07
Above chronological age	2	1,07
Average	27	14,44
Below chronological age	156	83,42

TABLE II

SPELLING AGE (N=187)

DESCRIPTION	N	Percent
Not known	4	2,14
Above chronological age	—	—
Average	19	10,16
Below chronological age	164	87,70

TABLE III

COMPREHENSION AGE (N=187)

DESCRIPTION	N	Percent
Not known	33	17,65
Above chronological age	3	1,60
Average	73	39,04
Below chronological age	30	16,04
Well below chronological age	48	25,67

It should be pointed out that the terms *Reading Age, Spelling Age* and *Comprehension Age* (referred to hereafter as RA, SA and CA respectively) are only guides to an understanding of the child's reading ability. In no way can they be viewed as a fixed property of the particular child. The terms should rather be seen as an estimate of the child's standing, relative to the time of his testing and choice of test. This is an important point to note since it has been argued by Vincent (1947) that there is not only "ambiguity in the computional methods for determining 'average reading age' but that the age scale has become firmly established in the teacher's or clinician's mind as the 'metric of reading attainment'." Vincent comments as follows:

> To say a child 'has' a particular RA implies some kind of *absolute judgement* about his development as a reader, and there is a genuine danger of misleading the uninformed when we describe reading attainment in terms of a child 'having' a particular 'reading age'. Something inert or fixed is implied . . . In effect RAs have a tendency ta *stick to or label* the reader — often in a perjorative way. (My emphasis.)

The importance of Vincent's argument, then, is that labels may be extremely misleading since, for example, two children who are backward in reading may have the same reading ages but their reading problems may be markedly different and they may behave differently as readers. Moreover, a below average test score does not necessarily imply a reading problem per se. This may

seem surprising but a careful examination of the tables above reveals that this is a plausible argument.

Returning to the tables listed above, the reading ages (given their limitations) are significant. The following points must first be noted before more detailed comments are made.

1a Of the 187 children tested for reading age, 156 were below average on the test score. The outstanding 29 children were above average. (2 scores not known).

b Of the 29 above average on their reading age scores, 14 were below average in their spelling age only. Their reading age was average.

2a Of the 187 children tested for spelling age, 164 were below average on the test score. The outstanding 19 were above average in terms of their spelling age. (4 not known).

b On closer examination it was noted that of these 19 children above average with respect to their spelling age, 6 were below average in so far as their reading age was concerned. More significant is the fact that 15 children were above average in both spelling and reading age scores.

At first glance the points outlined above suggest a certain amount of peculiarity and inconsistency, since a few extremely important questions beg themselves. In the first place one must ask what is the nature of the 'problem' with regard to those 29 children who, according to the tests administered, were either average or above average in terms of their reading ages?

Secondly, what is the nature of the problem as far as the 15 children with above average scores in both reading and spelling ages?

In both cases we are confronted with an extremely acute conceptual problem regarding the nature of a 'reading problem'. In other words it is an illogical assumption to maintain that simply because a given child is below average on a reading age score he is a reading 'problem' or reading retardate. In order to illustrate this point more adequately a closer examination of the two points outlined earlier will be made.

The complexity implied in the two earlier questions is more apparent than real. From the tester's reports and the figures presented in 1,, it was evident that 29 of the children who were below average in reading age were in actual fact not exhibiting a reading problem as such, but a spelling difficulty.

It would seem, then, that a number of parents and teachers have been inclined to send their children or pupils to the centre believing that some reading pathology existed when in actual fact the child simply lacked training in basic spelling techniques. One tester summed this point up adequately as follows:

> 'We can help him by training his abilities to pick out letters more clearly and also by training him to break up words into their syllables effectively. His reading, *surprisingly enough*, is adequate. Attention will be mostly given to his *spelling*'. (my emphasis).

Clearly the above comment suggests a distinction between reading and spelling though it must be admitted that the tester is not all that convinced of his implied conviction that such a distinction is necessary. His elated 'surprisingly enough' suggests this lack of conviction. The point of the matter is that at this stage it is important to raise the question of spelling difficulty and relate them to reading problems. In so far as the present research is concerned it was felt necessary that a distinction ought to be drawn, in some cases, between a spelling problem and a reading problem. The need to maintain this distinction is both conceptual and in some respects empirical. A distinction, moreover, is necessary since it can be argued that spelling and reading involve different processes. As Peters (1967) succinctly points out:

> 'In reading, the child or less competent reader is concerned with what a word *sounds* like. The unknown word is being transformed into the known meaningful sound. Spelling, *unlike* reading, is encoding a familiar and meaningful sound into a *strange* and unpredictable code.' (my emphasis).

Peters' argument is important. A child may be able to read fluently and yet find difficulty in spelling. The converse may also be true. This does, of course, not mean that the distinction between spelling and reading ability is clear-cut. Indeed in many respects one cannot avoid viewing spelling and reading as related. Nevertheless unless the distinction is maintained in certain cases, many teachers, parents and others will misunderstand what is meant by a 'reading problem'.

It would seem then, that the misunderstandings which have arisen concerning the nature of the child's problems have arisen mainly because of differing views as to what constitutes a reading problem. This is pointed out by Harris (1948) who argues:

> '. . . the real issues arise from different conceptions of the nature of the reading process itself and of the learning processes, sets and principles to be stressed.'

More recently, Applebee (1971) noted that there exist 'conflicting results and opposing theoretical orientations.'

While misunderstandings with respect to a child's spelling and reading problem may assist in understanding why this state of affairs has arisen the situation is further complicated when we consider point 2b above. Here it was noted that of the 187 children tested, 15 were above average on both reading and spelling test scores. Again the question is what is the nature of the child's problem?

The obvious conclusion to draw in this respect is that these children are finding difficulty in comprehending the reading material presented to them. That they are 'reading' the material effectively and spelling correctly is not disputed. Their main difficulty is that they are not capable of comprehending the reading material.

The implication here is that simple identification of a word in the reading material given to

the child does not imply that an understanding on the child's part has taken place.

Bearing this in mind we are again confronted with the question of what constitutes reading and what constitutes a reading problem? If, for example, a reading problem is simply seen in terms of identification then an inability to identify the symbols, sound etc, contained in the given reading material must logically constitute a reading problem.

However, the present research has indicated that some children have had difficulty in identifying symbols on the printed page and yet their comprehension has been average. Two particular children revealed interesting characteristics in this respect. These are presented as follows:

1(a) CHRONOLOGICAL AGE: 8,1
(b) READING AGE: 6,4
(c) SPELLING AGE: 6,8
(d) COMPREHENSION: 8,0

2 One tester made the following comment concerning the other child: '. . . although his reading speed was very slow and on errors he rated 6,5 years, his comprehension was *surprisingly* 8,5 years which is up to his chronolo gical age'. (my emphasis).

These two examples, perhaps, clearly indicate the misunderstandings that exist with regard to the nature of a reading problem. The surprise shown by the above tester is due to a misconception concerning reading as such. Implied in the tester's comment is the assumption that because the child was reading well below his standard he should be failing in respect of his comprehension ability. This misconception is due to the fact that the psychological processes of reading (identification) and comprehension have been compounded to imply a definition of reading. The point to bear in mind, however, is that the ability of the child to comprehend and his ability to identify do not necessarily imply each other. That a child can identify a piece of reading material placed before him does not mean that he understands what he has read. Comprehension of the particular material requires more than a simple identification of the printed symbols no matter how efficiently Hogaboam (1975) for example, have argued that the simple identification or decoding of a word is not sufficient for comprehension of the material to have taken place. This does not, of course, mean that the relationship between the two processes is independent. It simply means that these two processes may not always be related and for diagnostic and prognostic purposes this distinction may be extremely important. To understand comprehension on the part of the child liguistic considerations may need more emphasis. These liguistic considerations, however, do not simply include such factors as the syntactic or phonetical structures of the printed materials before the child. As pointed out earlier the simple identification of these does not guarantee that comprehension will take place. The specific liguistic considerations referred to here are the child's previous liguistic experience. This 'previous' experience refers to his liguistic knowledge prior to his entering the centre for testing. It involves an understanding of the child's liguistic background for it is this factor rather than mere identification that explains the child's ability or inability to comprehend. As Doctorow et al (1975) point out:

> '. . . a grammatically correct sentence consisting of individually meaningful words arranged in standard syntax and coded in single phonetic cues *does not necessarily communicate a sentence meaning*. Meanings for the sentence are conveyed when these characteristics stimulate the learner to construct *memories of previous* experience . . .' (my emphasis).

For the above authors the 'learner's previously acquired experience' is vitally important. For them the experience or knowledge the child brings with him to the reading situation is vital. Indeed, it is for this reason that the child's social background and his liguistic experience should be taken into consideration prior to the administration of part reading tests.

The importance of this 'previously acquired experience' is also stressed by Anderson and Ortony (1975). Their emphasis, moreover, is on the interaction between the material before the child and his previous experience. They claim:

> '. . . understanding is not just parsing. It is processing to a level whose depth depends on the degree of interaction with the context and the existing knowledge base.'

If the testers and others concerned with children were to keep in mind this 'existing knowledge base' then the tendency to argue that such children reveal some pathology ('reading problem') may be avoided. The child's 'problem' may simply be lack of experience in reading. His liguistic background, for example, may not have been stimulating enough. A child in this position, naturally enough, comes to the reading centre with a very poor 'existing knowledge base'. To argue, therefore, that some pathology exists is erroneous. Cromer (1970) points out that no pathology exists with a child of this nature. He argues, furthermore, that 'the idividual is not 'sick' but 'different'. Implied in Cromer's analysis is the very important point that in order to test a child one must either change the material presented before him or change his behaviour ie: the child's patterns of responding to the printed material. If this is overlooked there is a marked chance that the reading and comprehension tests administered to the child may not be assisting the tester in an adequate diagnosis of the child's 'problem'. Moreover, inadequate diagnosis may lead to inappropriate remedial suggestions.

CONCLUSION:

It is advisable that the concept of 'reading promlem' should not be employed too loosely. Employing the concept in this manner carries with it the very real danger of misinterpreting the child's particular 'problem'. Moreover, by distinguishing in some cases between the varying proceses involved in reading ie: spelling, identification and comprehension, one may avoid generalisation of the child's failure. One should, therefore, at all

costs give a careful consideration to all the processes involved in reading and realise that the child may be underachieving in one or all of those areas. This point is stressed by Perfetti and Hogaboam:

> 'The conceptualisation of reading as composed of *separate components* allows more than *one view* on the relationship between components. The cognitive components of reading can be considered as *separable and independent* or as separate and interdependent. (my emphasis).

The above statement clearly reveals that the concept of a reading problem is complex and does not suggest homogeneity. That is to say that children may be exhibiting different types of reading problems. Unless homogeneity is ignored when discussing reading problems, serious misunderstandings may well arise. Moreover, incorrect diagnosis and inappropriate remedial guidance may result. In the light of recent evidence it would, in fact, be naive to argue that one type of reading problem exists.

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