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# Current Trends in Reading

by Professor A. J. HARRIS

ONE of my primary principles is that there are hardly any universals in education. A particular school setting is a unique environment. In some ways it is different from any other school setting in the world and a particular procedure that may work well in one school setting just may not fit for one reason or another into another school setting. We have to consider the school as a whole, the reading programme as part of the whole curriculum. It has to fit in with the rest, it has to fit the background of the teachers, it has to be adapted to the abilities and needs and learning skills of the students and so, if I have any general principle about the teaching of reading, it is that there is no one way that is the right way for everybody.

The word "current" has more than one meaning — one meaning, of course, is "contemporary", but it also has another meaning and that is the flow of events or the flow of water and it seems to me that in education it is important to know not only where we are, but where we have come from, so that we may have a fair idea of the direction in which we are going.

In the history of the teaching of reading we have what I would call the pre-scientific period, which lasted up to about 1915. This was the period in which nearly all of the specific procedures that we now use were invented at one time or another and quite often re-invented in different places by people who were not aware of their existence in other parts of the world, but choices were made on the basis of opinions, rather than on the basis of scientific evidence or research.

Then, starting roughly at the time of World War I, we had a fresh development in the field of psychology, and particularly, the beginnings of a scientifically-orientated psychology, which immediately had an impact on educational practices, at least in the U.S.A.

Let me review very quickly some of the developments that took place during the period of 1915-1940, which I think of as the era in which education came under the impact of psychological research.

First of all, we had a good start on studies of the psychology of learning.

Secondly, we had eye movement studies — these actually started before the current century, but by 1915 or 1920 a great deal was already known about the way the eyes behave when we read.

We had the implication of wide-spread testing surveys. In America, the first standardized achievement tests were tried out in the schools around 1920 to 1922 and the results horrified the school administrators because they disclosed such wide ranges of achievement at every grade level. This led immediately to explorations of a variety of ways of grouping pupils, so as to eliminate or reduce the effect of individual differences in learning ability within a class group.

Another effect of the school surveys was the disclosure of a very high rate of non-promotion from the first grade to the second grade. In our large cities in the 1920s, between twenty and forty per cent of the children failed to be promoted, and an immediate result of that was the development of the idea of reading readiness, as it was considered that such a large percentage of non-promotions must indicate that many of these children were being exposed to instruction for which they were not mature enough or prepared enough.

There was an emphasis on reading as a thinking process. This was quite a change because until this time, reading had been conceived of mainly as a process of oral reproduction of what the author had written, and the stress in textbooks on how to teach reading until 1920 or so was largely on elocution and how to put the proper expression into the oral reproduction. The new trend was on the role of reading as a process of thought units, and even the meeting of the mind of the student with the mind of the author in what we call critical reading and sometimes creative reading.

A minority group was involved heavily in the progressive education movement which had many interesting and good features, but one deplorable one — the statement which is a quotation from one of the leaders of the movement: "Let them read to learn and incidentally they will learn to read." The idea that reading can be learned incidentally was, I think, a very damaging idea. Of course it can be learned incidentally, but I am a victim of incidental learning of tennis and incidental learning of swimming and in these skills I know that if I had had proper instruction from the beginning, my performance would have been a good deal better. I

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would hate to have to listen to musicians who learned to play the piano incidentally while listening to other musicians.

A major factor was that during the entire period there was an acceleration of research, which was published and then tended to get into the text-books, which influenced the way teachers were trained to teach reading.

Then came World War II and, at least in the U.S.A., an almost complete cessation of research and new development over a period of several years because everyone was involved in one way or another in the war effort. In the schools one of the things that happened was a kind of pendulum effect. In the pre-scientific period before 1915, there had been certain emphases which scientific research indicated were undesirable — the almost exclusive pre-occupation with oral reading, the extremely heavy emphasis upon phonics in the introductory stages of teaching, the lack of interest in thought-getting as an outcome of reading, the lack of interest in promoting silent reading skills. Then as we came down to 1940 these trends tended to continue during the war period unchecked towards the opposite extremes so that, whereas our earliest reports from our first reading clinics tended to stress the large number of children who had been taught phonics to the point where they stopped and sounded out nearly every word and so were very slow, halting, laborious readers who were not very good at getting the meaning, by the 1940s, there was a quite different population in our clinics — children who had been taught by an anti-phonic method. For a while our teachers were indoctrinated with the idea in some school systems that it was sinful to teach phonics, that the whole word was the basis of speaking and therefore it should be the basis of reading instruction. I remember being told by classroom teachers how they would bootleg phonics instruction into their classrooms with one eye on the door, so that when the principal came along, they would abruptly discontinue and do something else. We then had a pendulum effect which carried some of the changes away from the older ways of doing things too far in the opposite direction and produced new problems and different problems from the ones we had before.

Along with this there was a slow-down of research and development and an attitude of complacency. In the late 1940s, educators in general thought they really knew the answers and they were not interested in new trends and new developments.

From 1950, we have had what I would call a period of expanding research and the introduction of technology into education in the United States. I would like to review several of the major trends which started within the past ten or fifteen years and which are now strongly in evidence, not only in the U.S.A., but in many other countries.

The first has been a correction of the anti-phonics trend. Instruction, not only in phonics, but in word structure and in the systematic use of the context in which a word is found as a means to figuring out what the unknown word is, so that we talk of them altogether as word recognition skills or word attack skills, has come back strongly into the reading programme.

A second has been a strong reaction from the progressive education idea that reading can be learnt incidentally or that by the time children have learnt to figure out words for themselves, reading instruction is over. I can remember fifteen to twenty years ago, many of our school systems stopped reading instruction after children had been exposed to it for three years and assumed that from then on, they should be able to read. Now, the emphasis in the U.S.A. is on an integrated twelve-year programme extending right through primary education, intermediate education and secondary education, and in addition, we have reading courses in all of our major universities for those students who need them or think they can profit from them. So a second correction has been a correction of the emphasis on incidental learning.

A third major correction has been the almost complete disappearance of complacency and instead what might be regarded as an over-eagerness to adopt new ideas before they have been proven to be good ideas. We are in a period, I believe, in which innovation for its own sake seems to be a virtue and I have learned from sad experience that movement is not always progress forward. Sometimes, it is sideways and sometimes it is even a backward step.

A second side of the current tendency is an effort to find and maintain balance. We are concerned that in correcting the over-emphasis of the recent past, we do not develop new undesirable extreme points of view. And so the trend, in the United States at least, is to try to find a balanced middle course, the golden mean between extremes that was talked about over two thousand years ago by Aristotle. We hope that in avoiding one undesirable trend we are not going headlong into another over-emphasis that will create its own problems, and so what we are striving for is a reading programme in which it is not a question of phonics versus emphasis on meaning, but how to combine effective word recognition techniques with the use of interesting, meaningful material and careful de-

velopment of reading as a thought-getting process. We do not regard this as *either/or* but *and.*

In another area we have had a great deal of controversy over the degree to which reading instruction can and should be individualized. I think we are coming out with a point of view that is becoming more common, that regards the reading programme as one in which different kinds of reading skills and reading activities can best be carried out in different ways, some with the entire class as a whole, some in smaller groups and still others on a totally individualized basis; and so those who believe that all reading instruction should be individualized represent a very small minority, those who believe that everything should be done with the class as a whole represent a diminishing rearguard conservative minority and most people are trying to find out what is an appropriate combination of whole class, small group and individualized kinds of learning experiences that are suitable for their particular students.

A third aspect has been the argument over basal readers — books written and designed specifically to be used in the teaching of reading and presented in a cumulative sequential series— versus the use of library books or what sometimes are called trade books in the U.S.A. — individual story books and individual factual books — and we are coming to a point of view in which it is not the text-book versus the individual library book, but how to utilize both in the most effective kind of combination, so as to get a rich, varied and richly nourishing reading programme as a result.

The third major trend has been in the development of newer technologies that allow certain parts of the reading programme to be more successfully individualized than could be done formerly.

Back in the 1930s, one of our far-sighted writers on reading instruction, Louella Cole, envisaged a reading classroom in which the teacher would have at her disposal, boxes of materials — practice materials for the development of phonic skills, practice materials for the development of phrasing and reading by thought units, boxes of materials for the development of different kinds of comprehension skills, and materials for recreational reading; the teacher would be a diagnostician who would analyse the skills and the needs of each child and lay out an individualized reading programme for that child, so that no two children in the room would be doing the same thing at the same time. For something like fifteen years after that was written we did not have the materials that would make it possible, even if a teacher wanted to teach that way. But starting around 1950 or 1955, we began to get sets of individualized practice materials; the first of these to appear was the S.R.A. Reading Laboratories. They came in boxes as predicted and each box had eleven different levels of reading difficulty in them. Within each level was a series of numbered folders, each consisting of a reading selection followed by questions, and in a second box a set of answer keys. When the child finished reading his selection he would go and get the answer key, take it to his seat, mark his own answers right or wrong; if he had had difficulties, he would then consult the teacher for help as to why his answers were wrong and perhaps go back to more exercises at the same level or even in certain cases, go back to an easier level of difficulty in the same type of exercise before going ahead again. Provision was made for keeping individual records in note books as to exactly what had been done, progress charts and so on. Such boxed materials are available in the United States at all levels from the first grade through secondary school levels and are being used fairly widely as part of the reading programme. They are used, not as a total reading programme, but either sequentially for a period of a month or two during the year, or more frequently, for one or two days a week for part of the reading time.

Programmed reading materials have come into use in the last few years. In general these started at the secondary school level and worked down. We are now beginning to get programmed materials intended for use in the very earliest stages of reading instruction. So far I am not impressed by most of the programmed instruction material in reading. I think that much of it has been written by people who did not understand reading instruction, but I think it will improve and eventually we should have excellent programmes for self-instruction that can be used on a correspondence school basis for people who live too far away from a good school to have adequate school instruction available.

So self-setting materials, work-books, laboratories and programmed materials have made it possible to individualize certain parts of the reading programme in a way that was not possible until fairly recently.

A fourth trend has been the involvement of specialists from many disciplines of learning. Until recently, the only people who were really interested in reading were educators, a few educational psychologists and, in terms of children with reading disabilities, a few medical specialists, usually from the field of neurology. During the past few years, however, we have had sociologists working in the field of reading; two

important studies have come out on the sociology of reading instruction and the sociology of reading research, both financed by the Carnegie Foundation of the United States and done since 1960.

Librarians are clamouring for a louder voice in the reading programme and we have a movement on foot in the United States to the effect that there should be a professionally trained teacher-librarian in every elementary school.

The specialists in linguistics have become very actively interested in reading instruction only within the past six years, and they are now producing bibliographies and helping in the writing of text-books and so on.

For a long time educational psychologists had neglected reading, but since the development of programmed instruction, they are back in full force.

Psychiatrists, psychologists and neurologists are all engaged in studying the children who do not learn how to read well and trying to develop from them principles of how the normal child should be taught.

Eye specialists have come into the picture very strongly in our country, both ophthalmologists with medical backgrounds and optometrists, and even the pediatrician, the specialist in child medicine, has begun to show a marked interest and in some places to be a helpful source of referral, recognizing a reading difficulty for what it is, rather than assuming that it is a problem of malnutrition or not enough sleep at night or something that can be treated with pills.

A fifth major trend has been the blossoming of educational research. Here I am talking specifically about Great Britain, where there is major research sponsored by the Ministry of Education, and the U.S.A. where the amount of government money spent on educational research has expanded phenomenally within the past seven or eight years. The United States Office of Education ten years ago was spending an average of four million dollars a year. In ten years the annual expenditure has risen from four million to one hundred million per year and none of this is research done by the central staff. It is all on research which is proposed by individuals like myself, referred for review to other individuals like myself. It is usually sent to five readers and at least three of them must think it is a good idea for it to receive further consideration. After it is sponsored by the jury of readers, it is then reviewed by the Office of Education specialists to determine whether supporting it is financially feasible, and on this basis, in 1961, the Office of Education decided to spend one million dollars on a series of research studies on how to teach beginning reading. During the year 1964/65, twenty-seven co-ordinated studies went on simultaneously in different parts of the country and all of the results were fed into a central co-ordinating centre at the University of Minnesota. The co-ordinated report came out about two months ago.

But this is just one evidence of the way in which educational research has begun to receive support from government as well as from private philanthropic foundations in our country. All one needs in order to get financial support for research is a good enough idea and then knowing whom to ask for the money and in what way; writing research proposals has actually become a new professional speciality in our country. Our university at times hires a professional writer. He knows nothing about the field of enquiry, but he knows how to formulate the ideas into the right kind of verbal presentation.

So the emphasis upon research has grown tremendously and along with it, there is an eagerness to avoid the twenty year lag that there used to be between the findings of a research result and the beginning of its application in the schools. We used to expect that it would take twenty years for a good new idea to get into the classroom. We are trying to shorten that now.

One of the latest developments has been the establishment of a clearing house on research in reading at the University of Indiana. Everything that is written on reading instruction on the American continent is read by a whole staff of readers there, digested, and an abstract of about two to three hundred words is written. If the study is important enough, it is then published in a new journal called "Research in Education" published by the United States Office of Education. Anyone who wants a copy of the full study can write and ask for it and it will be supplied on microfilm at the rate of 9c. for fifty pages, so that we can get complete original studies, doctoral theses and so on at very low cost if we only find out about their existence by reading the reports from the clearing house on reading research and then writing and asking for them. The clearing house will also provide bibliographies on request on any subject in which they have a reasonable amount of material in their files and they publish periodic bibliographies on the more popular topics on which they receive questions.

A sixth emphasis in the United States has been on trying to overcome the tremendous difference between the achievement of the children of the middle class and the children of the lower classes.

Our research has shown that the social and economic status of the parents has a more powerful bearing on the school achievement of the children than any differences in school policy, school administration, teachers' salaries, number of books in the library or anything like that; therefore, much of our research is directed towards the question: what can we do to compensate for the environmental deficiencies of the children of the poor?

A seventh major trend has been renewed recognition of reading disability as a serious social problem. In New York City, for example, having eight million people in one community, we tend to have more of any kind of problem than you will find almost anywhere else in the world, except perhaps in a city of comparable size, like London or Tokyo. We have probably as many juvenile delinquents in our population as you will find anywhere and our juvenile courts have related child guidance clinics to act with psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. One of the striking findings has been that our typical adolescent juvenile delinquent is retarded five years below grade level in reading, and 75 per cent of them have significant disabilities in reading. That does not say that the reading disability causes the delinquency or that the delinquent trend causes the poor scholarship, but it does indicate at least that both arise out of the same general background and are related to each other in some fashion.

Similarly, we find difficulty in reading common among the children who are referred to psychiatric services and mental health clinics for all kinds of reasons — personality problems, conduct difficulties, misbehaviour and so on; the majority of them are also poor readers.

So the reading disability is pervasively intertwined with all other kinds of handicaps that we find in children, and its social cost, if not corrected, runs into hundreds of millions of dollars per year in terms of ruined lives.

We are therefore beginning to get recognition of reading disability as a field of special education along with the teaching of the mentally retarded, the teaching of the blind, the teaching of the deaf, the teaching of the crippled and so on.

Added to this, we are beginning to get interdisciplinary co-operation. Last August I attended what I think was an historic first meeting called under the auspices of one of our private foundations, with people specifically selected to represent all of the varied professionals who were interested in reading problems. Among the twenty odd people gathered together from all parts of the country were psychologists, neurologists, pediatricians, eye specialists, psychiatrists, linguists and there was one social worker. The purpose of the meeting was to plan an interdisciplinary attack on the causes and correction of reading problems. One result has been the setting up of plans for a permanent secretariat for this group. An executive secretary is being appointed and will be working full time with a staff of assistants. The group will come together periodically for meetings of several days to review possible research studies that might be carried out on a large scale and with a staff representing many disciplines to try to get really at the roots of the problem.

An eighth trend is the development of professional organizations devoted to reading improvement. Here I will mention only the development of the International Reading Association which was formed in 1956 by the merger of two relatively small and feeble previous organizations and which has grown in the period from 1956 to the present from the 5,000 members that it inherited from the parent organizations to approximately 45,000 members in fifty countries at the present time. One of its movements has been to develop national reading associations in various parts of the world, so within the past five years, national reading associations have been formed in Great Britain, Sweden, Denmark, Australia. The most recent, I believe ,is Japan, where there was a national society for the science of reading which is now affiliated to the international group.

The ninth trend has been a tremendous outpouring since 1960 of new approaches and new material for the teaching of reading. You have all heard about i.t.a., but this is only one of many rather valuable innovations in the teaching of beginning reading. In our country, experimentation is now going on with such programmes as "words in colour", in which every letter of the alphabet is portrayed in a different hue of the rainbow, with several types of linguistically oriented programmes with programmed instruction material. This spring, we have had a first report on computerised reading instruction from Stanford University in California.

We are confronted with a problem in that the new programmes are being developed faster than the research workers can keep up with them and produce the objective impartial evaluation necessary to find out whether the innovation is an improvement or not; it takes at least six years

after a research programme begins before we really find out what the long-term as well as the short-term effects are.

For example, I began a study on a comparison of four methods of teaching reading in the first grade, which was planned in 1963 and began in the fall of 1964. We have now followed the first group of children through the third year of schooling. It will take at least another eight months to analyse the results and get a report on it, and so by the time that report appears and digests of it appear in periodicals, it will probably be at least six years from the beginning of the study until readers find out what our results were.

So when new programmes come along and the school system is told that this is a tremendous improvement and persuaded to try it out, it seems to me that there are things that can be done during the interval of waiting for a dependable large-scale, long-continued research. One of them is informed critical analysis by the most expert people available locally to do such an analysis. Sometimes one can then see such flaws in the material that one is pretty certain that it is not worth trying out carefully, but if, after preliminary critical reading, it looks worth trying, then the next stage should be a small-scale try-out with one or two classes in schools selected to be representative and with teachers who are willing to be venturesome and to take the risk of doing worse with the new procedure, as well as in the hope of doing better. On the basis of the small-scale try-out, one can find out many things about how the method works, in advance of careful comparative evaluation and one can then usually tell whether it is worth while trying to build a large-scale, carefully controlled research study. Small-scale try-outs, I believe in thoroughly, as being within the province of any school system, but careful comparative evaluation has so many technical pitfalls in it, there are so many ways that one can go wrong in a programme designed to compare one method of teaching with another, that it is a risky business unless one has well-qualified research personnel and ample funds to do things properly.

Let me indicate what I mean by logical analysis applied to a programme — the "words in colour' programme. Each of the letters of the alphabet is presented in the early stages of reading instruction in a unique colour, or rather each sound of the language has a unique colour assigned to it, and if it is a sound that is sometimes represented by one letter, sometimes by another letter and sometimes by a combination of letters, no matter what the printed symbol is, it will always appear in that colour. For example, if orange is the colour for the vowel sound of the broad /a/ — aa — then, if that is represented at one time ban an /a/ standing by itself, at another by /ah), or it may be represented by various other letter combinations, no matter what the letters are, it will always be represented by the same colour, so the child is taught to recognize the colour primarily and then to learn what letter combinations may at times represent the sound.

When children learn this system, they have to be able to pronounce a word sound by sound and then put the sounds together, or what we call "blend". That means they have to be able to hear the sounds accurately within the words in the first place. Research has shown that many children entering reading instruction have rather inaccurate ears for the sounds within words. They recognize the word as a whole quite well, but if you ask them to listen to the first sound in the word, they have great difficulty. We find many children for whom "moon" and "soon" can easily be distinguished in speech but if you ask the child whether these two words begin with the same sound or different sounds, they have trouble answering correctly; so difficulty in auditory perception, inability to hear exactly what sound the word begins with and what sound comes next and what sound follows after that, particularly when the word is longer than two or three phonemes or sound units, is one cause of potential difficulty.

A second problem is the fact that we know that eight per cent of boys are at least partially colour-blind. They have great difficulty distinguishing reds from greens and a smaller percentage of them have difficulty with blues and yellows, so the fine colour distinctions that one must use in a system like "words in colour" are only partially visible to a substantial minority of the children who come into our school system. It happens that very few girls suffer from this particular disability, but eight per cent of boys is a fairly substantial total; it means that out of a class of thirty children, one can normally expect at least one partially colour-blind child. If you combine the fifteen or twenty per cent who have great difficulty with auditory perception with the eight per cent of the boys who have difficulties with colour vision, you come out with a conservative estimate that twenty per cent of a typical group of beginning readers will have trouble with the "words in colour" system that is related specifically to the method of teaching that that system involves.

I think I could take up almost any scheme for teaching beginning reading and show logically what particular psychological abilities it depends upon and give a rough estimate at least of the percentage of six-year-olds who are likely to have difficulty with it because they are not well developed as yet in one or more of those essential abilities required by the method.

So when we consider new approaches in materials, we are likely to find that the majority of children can learn to read by any of them and that a small minority which will vary in size from method to method, but will always be present, will have difficulty with any of them.

A final point — recognition of the great importance of the skill of the teacher. Two years ago, Joyce Morris, who is one of the leading research workers on reading in Great Britain, visited the United States and I had the pleasure of listening to one of her lectures. The gist of her talk was that results in the experiments that she was then conducting indicated that variations in the skill of the teacher were far more important in influencing the learning of the children than any differences between one method of teaching and another.

For the past three years, as I mentioned earlier, I have been conducting a study of my own on primary grade reading at the first, second and third year levels and, at least in terms of our first and second year results, we have replicated Dr. Morris's findings. The range of results between the best and the worst teachers in each of our four methods is vastly greater than the average difference between any two methods. On a scale on which our average differences rarely exceed two points on the numerical scale when we are comparing one method with another, the range of difference between the best teacher and the worst teacher in one of our methods was from 18 points to 35 points. This was after we had statistically corrected the scores of each class for variations in reading aptitude or reading readiness scores, so they represent real differences in teacher ability to get children to learn.

I am convinced then that perhaps what is most important is training teachers to use the method they are going to use efficiently and effectively and that when we do this, many methods will arrive eventually at similar achievement levels. It is the ability of the teacher to milk the method dry, to get the most out of it, that seems to me the most important feature.

I would like to sum up by saying that I have tried to give a brief historical background and point out ten current trends.

The period in which we are living now is one which is teeming with new ideas, with innovations, with radical departures, so much so that it is hard to keep well informed about what is new and what is current. These innovations have far outstripped the abilities of research workers to evaluate them and to make the careful comparative studies necessary.

In educational research we need to have the same thing done over and over again. In medical research the physicians have found out repeatedly that the discoverer of a new drug always gets good results with it. You have to have it tested in a number of independent laboratories over a period of time and study it, not only for its major effects, but also for possible harmful side effects, and to continue this study for possible delayed effects as well as immediate effects before the new drug should be labelled as safe for general use. In education, we need the equivalent of the independent research unit or laboratory. The results have to be duplicated over and over again before they can be accepted as dependable and repeatable. Even my own ideas I do not venture to try to evaluate without waiting for other people to do it, because I know that my own enthusiasm and my own confidence that it will work well will convey itself to the teachers and they will outdo themselves, at least during the period of the experiment. When the experiment is over they may sink back into lethargy.

So there is a crying need for careful evaluation of what is new and what is different . If we do not do this, it is very easy for us to imitate the knight who mounted his horse and rode off in all directions.

I wish to emphasize also the need to pay more attention to teacher training and teacher supervision, not only in the preparatory teacher training programmes before they become teachers, but even more so in the first year or two of actual classroom experience, because this is the critical time when the teacher sinks or swims, and putting into application what one has read in the text-book is not really an easy task. When the children are not bright and are not ready learners and come from a limited background or perhaps do not speak the language of instruction with fluency, the task of the teacher is enormous and the beginning teacher certainly needs expert guidance until she has learned how to get results

Finally, if we have a continuation of the emphasis upon large-scale, well-supported, carefully planned and executed research, we should know ten years from now a great deal more about how we should teach reading than I or anyone else knows at the present time.