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[Review of the article ‘Learning to read: The great debate’ by Jeanette S. Chall]

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CHALL. Jeanette S. 1983. Learning to read:the great debate; 2nd ed.New York; McGraw Hill.

In 1967 the first edition of Learning to Read was published with immediate impact.It has been recognised as a classic work analysing the research on the value of phonics, look and say, and knowing the alphabet in teaching reading. Chall's meticulous documentation of research from 1910-1965 and insightful analysis helped teachers pick their way through some of the controversies in the teaching of reading as they tried to find the 'best' method of instruction.

In this updated edition Chall has left her original text unaltered as it provides a neat summary of a section in the history of research on reading and she has added an introductory 'update' covering research completed in the years between 1967 and 1981.

Chall has included an analysis of more recent leaders in the field as Gibson and Levin, and Carrol and Gough, and Venezky in this update.This makes it an excellent introduction to central issues in the teaching of reading. Some topics covered succintly in this section are:

- Reviews of Phonetic Studies
- Classroom Comparisons
- Research on the effectiveness of Different Kinds of Phonics
- The relationship of Decoding to Reading Comprehension
- Changes in Professional Views.

Chall makes specific recommendations some of which are:

i Research after 1967 has lent even more support to code-oriented systems of teaching reading.

ii This research also suggests that the direct-synthetic procedures are more effective than indirect phonics teaching.However, Chall makes a plea for more research beyond Grade 3 to evaluate the effect of direct-phonics teaching on later comprehension.
Interesting to note here is that Chall states that "the evidence seems to be stronger for a direct synthetic approach" for those with reading and learning disabilities.

iii Another recommendation, which I would support, is Chall's recognition that "an analysis of the phonics debate within broader educational and societal issues may be helpful."

Chall's focus is detailed but narrow. Her work describes the results of emperical studies and the reader must turn to other works to attempt to understand why one method may be more effective than another.While Chall does attempt to match her conclusion to some theoretical framework the reading educator will indeed have to consider "broader educational and societal issues" to interpret Chall's findings.

This is a book any serious reading teacher should become familiar with.

NOTE: For those of our readers who have not already come across the work, Chall published another book in 1983: Stages of Reading Development also published by McGraw Hill. Here Chall attempts to describe the stages through which the reader passes in his reading development. Chall is suggesting that children are qualitatively different in their approach to reading at different stages. She gives characteristics of each stage and provides suggestions for teaching, at home or at school, at each level. This another book that would be a valuable addition to the staff-room library.

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