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Teaching Children About Reading: An Overview

Teaching children to read has been a central focus of our educational system for over 350 years. Despite the variety of subjects treated in school, reading usually has been viewed as the most prominent of "the three R's." Teachers, parents and interested citizens today voice similar concern for reading. Despite efforts to instill in all children the ability to read and the habit of reading, schools are under attack for an apparent decline in student reading achievement. School critics cite poor instruction, cluttered curricula and a loss of teacher professionalism as major factors. School supporters counter with the argument that the range of students who remain in school has increased, causing score averages to decline; however, the average student today is better educated and knows more about his world than his counterpart of fifty years ago.¹ Both groups also note changes in social climate, especially with the family unit, and the advent of television as major contributors to reading problems.

It is not the purpose of this paper to resolve these issues nor to take a position with regard to the quality of reading instruction in today's classrooms. Instead, this paper will describe briefly the roles that teachers and students assume in the acquisition of reading skills, the general instructional approaches to reading, and the ways in which librarians can participate in strengthening children's reading performance.

TEACHER-STUDENT ROLES IN LEARNING TO READ

Learning to read requires learning both the skills necessary to decode print fluently and to think critically about the meaning and significance of the information being conveyed. Schools usually do an adequate job of teaching most students how to decode. Of real concern, however, is the observation that most students are not becoming critical readers who desire to read once external demands (tests, papers, teacher's questions) are lifted. Students' concepts of reading seem to reflect an overemphasis on word-calling strategies and a passive approach to extracting information from text.² Consequently, many students do not construct meaning from what they read or evaluate the validity and quality of the ideas conveyed, unless they are specifically directed to do so. This passivity to print may be more destructive to a student's desire and habit to read than uninteresting daily instruction.

Librarians can help provide the models, experiences, atmosphere and encouragement essential to the development in children of an appropriate concept of reading — one that emphasizes the comprehension, evaluation and application of printed information. In order to appreciate the significance of this role, it is helpful to understand the teacher's role and the student's responsibility in learning to read.

The effective teacher strives to teach diagnostically — he or she knows the content and the organization of the reading program and attempts to match the materials with the strengths and needs of each student. Knowing the content or scope of the material requires careful examination of the skills taught at all grade levels, not just at the grade level assigned. Knowing the organization or sequence for teaching the skill aids the teacher in pacing the program appropriately. He or she can also adjust or supplement the curriculum in order to work on student weaknesses in specific reading skill areas.

The effective teacher is familiar with a variety of approaches to reading and can adjust teaching strategies to communicate with the students being instructed. This teacher is continually seeking new ways to capture student interest, to determine better matches between student ability and material difficulty level, and to foster the transfer of skills from reading class to the student's independent reading in the content areas and for recreation.

The teacher is responsible for providing sufficient practice opportunities in reading to effect this transfer of skills. To the degree that the practice activities involve students in thinking about the skills being exercised, so that the time spent is on task (TOT), the teacher can expect the student's reading performance to improve.

Finally, the effective teacher of reading must be observant. Through formal and informal assessment procedures, data are recorded that document each student's growth in reading. Thus, the teacher can evaluate the skills being taught (scope), the organization of the material (sequence), the effectiveness of the instructional methodology (teaching), and the impact of the practice exercises (TOT) on the student's independent reading.

The student also must be actively involved in learning to read. Regardless of the teacher's skill, it is the student who must attend, question, practice and apply the skills being presented. To become a proficient reader, the student must have many positive experiences with books, both at home and at school. Young children learn to value books and the ability to read through having books read to them, having adult models who read, and being praised for playing with books and talking about the stories they contain. When children learn that reading is enjoyable, important and a skill that they can acquire, they are more likely to profit from early instruction in reading. For such children, attention to the teacher, persistence in the work assigned, and confidence in their ability to learn to read contribute significantly to early and continued success in reading.

In a well-balanced reading program, the student learns not only how to associate speech sounds with print, but also to think about the content of the text prior to, during and subsequent to reading. Such a student comes to recognize that reading is a complex, active, cognitive process. The reader uses past experiences and the knowledge of language to associate speech sounds with graphic stimuli (text), and attempts to bring meaning to and derive meaning from that text. Reading, then, is a constructive language process. The reader must rely on inherited intellectual capacity, fluent decoding skills, and knowledge of the world in order to comprehend the text (see Figure 1).

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONAL APPROACHES TO READING

The development of the most effective instructional approach to reading has been a perennial concern of educators. Although the pendulum has swung several times between whole word and phonics approaches, a majority of the students who have been systematically instructed have learned how to read.

Today, the pendulum appears to be poised somewhere near the center of its course, with most new reading series utilizing a variety of approaches to teaching reading. This eclecticism, or flexibility in approach, seems to hold more promise for reaching a majority of students than rigid

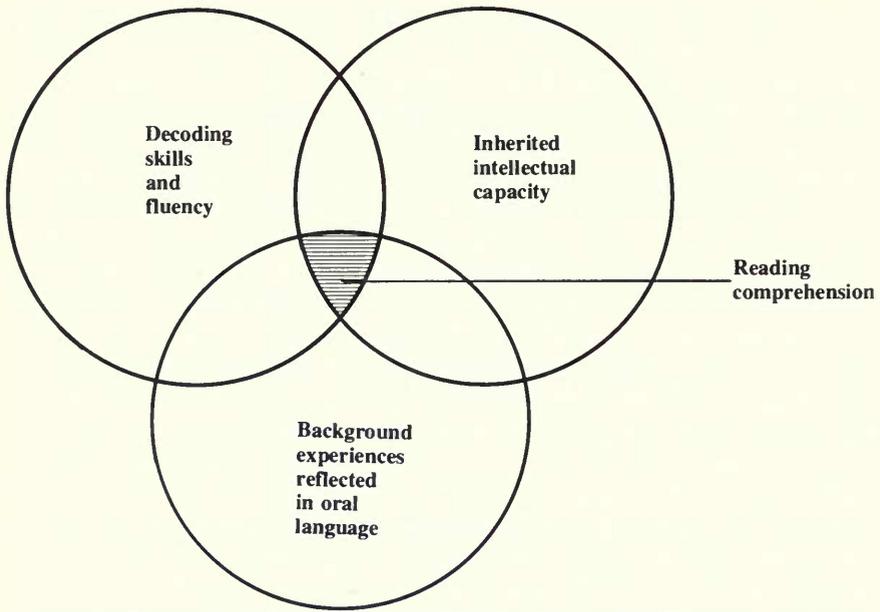


FIGURE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE READER AND READING COMPREHENSION

adherence to a single approach.³ However, flexibility in teaching requires well-trained teachers capable of adjusting their approaches to the special needs of the students. To the extent that the teacher is not secure in his/her knowledge of reading, the materials can dictate the program and limit its effectiveness.

Various instructional programs for teaching reading usually share similar objectives: to develop fluent decoding ability, to develop independent readers, to develop critical readers, and to develop in readers the desire to read. However, they may employ different approaches to reach these goals. These approaches to teaching reading can be represented along a continuum from synthetic to analytic (see Table 1).

Synthetic approaches stress sound-symbol correspondences (phonics) and the synthesizing of meaningful units out of isolated sounds; analytic approaches emphasize the analysis of familiar words, learned as units, in order to discover sound-symbol relationships. Single-letter phonics approaches use key words, and sometimes key pictures, to teach children sound-letter correspondences. Children first learn to name the letters of the alphabet, and then to associate sounds with those letters. For example, a student might name the letter *c*, identify the initial sound in the word /cookie/, then recognize and provide the sound /k/ for the letter *c*; i.e., $c \rightarrow$ /cookie/ \rightarrow /k/.

TABLE 1. GENERAL APPROACHES TO READING INSTRUCTION

<i>Synthetic</i>					<i>Analytic</i>
1	2	3	4	5	6
<p>1. <i>Single-letter phonics approaches.</i> The emphasis is on learning isolated phoneme-grapheme correspondences, usually through a key word; e.g., <i>a</i> - / apple / - a /. Isolated phonemes are blended to form words; control of word pattern enhances the utility of phonics rules.</p> <p>2. <i>Family phonics approaches.</i> These begin like single-letter approaches. However, they quickly identify high-frequency grapheme patterns (<i>-og, -in, -ake</i>) which are learned as units. These units form "families" of words; e.g., <i>-in</i> family: pin, win, tin, spin, shin.</p> <p>3. <i>Linguistic approaches.</i> These do not isolate phonemes. Rather, children spell the words before saying them. Since phoneme-grapheme correspondences are kept regular, the child intuitively grasps those correspondences with repeated exposure. This approach stresses the similarities between spoken and written language — print is speech written down.</p> <p>4. <i>Whole word/sight work/basal approach.</i> A corpus of 50 to 125 words of high utility are taught by sight (as units). Stories are created early and fluent reading is stressed. Later, some phonic and structural analysis relationships may be taught for children who require direct instruction. This is especially true of phonics skills. This approach is the most widely practiced today.</p> <p>5. <i>Individualized reading approaches.</i> Usually reserved for upper elementary levels, this approach has pupils selecting paperback books for reading. Conferences with the teacher are used to monitor progress and for specific skill instruction as needed.</p> <p>6. <i>Language experience approach.</i> Through discussion, group activities and interest centers, children are stimulated to create their own stories. Transcribed by the teacher, the stories are read by the children. This approach emphasizes writing daily. Skill instruction is provided as needed — frequently in small, flexible groupings.</p>					

The student is taught four or five high-utility consonants, including some glided consonants like *s, f, m* and one vowel, usually *a*; i.e., *a* → /apple/ → /ā/.

The next step entails learning to blend sounds, in a left-to-right progression, to form single-syllable words that have highly predictable (regular) sound-symbol correspondences, e.g.:

/c/ → /a/ → /t/

/ca/ → /t/

/cat/

Simple stories are written using these single-syllable, phonically regular words; e.g., "Go and get Dad." Students begin reading these stories even as they are introduced to new letters and the sounds they represent. The only words learned as units are those which are of high utility and are either not predictably spelled (e.g., *done, is, to, said*), or introduced earlier than the rules that explain their pronunciation (e.g., *father, helicopter, birthday*).

Family phonics approaches introduce sound-symbol correspondences in a fashion similar to single-letter phonics. However, once high-

frequency vowel-consonant patterns are constructed (termed phonogram patterns), "families" of words are generated by substituting initial consonants and keeping the phonogram pattern constant. For example:

the /at/ family
 /a/ → /t/ ⇒ /at/
 /c/ → /at/ ⇒ /cat/
 /b/ → /at/ ⇒ /bat/
 /m/ → /at/ ⇒ /mat/
 /f/ → /at/ ⇒ /fat/

Here phonograms are learned as units rather than sounded letter by letter. This approach, like the single-letter approach, introduces highly predictable spelling patterns early and minimizes the number of phonically unpredictable words. It is presented as a more expeditious way to introduce new words to young students because it emphasizes pattern regularities in words earlier than in single-letter approaches; e.g., "*Bill is at the park.*"

Slightly to the analytical side of family phonics approaches are linguistic approaches. Bloomfield and Barnhart⁴ and Fries⁵ proposed that text is speech written down and emphasized the relationships between printed and spoken language. They believed that the young reader has the linguistic competence to discover the relationships between printed and spoken language if he is exposed to predictably spelled words in a consistent fashion.

The linguistic approach requires that the student learn to identify all alphabet letters by name but not by sound. Words are presented that contain letters for which only one sound has been taught. No rules are taught about letter-sound correspondences. Instead, minimal variation among words accentuates pattern regularity (*pin, fin, win, tin*). Through repeated exposure to these predictably spelled patterns, especially in simple sentences, the student will infer the pattern regularities that exist in print. For example: "The fat cat sat on Nat." The student's inference is: *at* → /at/.

The whole word, sight-word, or look-say approach has traditionally been termed the basal approach to teaching reading. After letter names are learned, the student is taught 50-150 high-utility words as units. Interesting stories are composed using these words, with the expectation that the students will be able to read the stories fluently because the words are familiar. Later in the first year, there is some analysis of letter-sound correspondences among familiar words. For example:

l → /l/
 as at the beginning of
 /lunch/, /ladder/, /lap/

While some attention is given to sound-symbol correspondences and to patterns in words, more attention is paid to use of context cues and memo-

rization to learn new vocabulary. Students are expected to infer phonics information through experiences with text. For example:

Look at Willie run!

See him catch the train.

The individualized approaches to teaching reading employ some or all of the various techniques discussed. Actually, individualized approaches describe more the ways in which students and materials are paired, and the instructional settings for reading, than they do the means by which decoding skills are taught.

In an individualized reading program, each student is assisted in selecting reading materials from a wide range of books. Students read the books on their own, and confer with the teacher on a regular basis. During the conference, the teacher will discuss the book with the student, ask questions about the content, perhaps have the student read aloud for diagnostic purposes, and suggest further readings. Special groups will be created to teach skills to students who need instruction. Usually individualized reading programs are not established in the primary grades, because most of the students lack the reading skills and independence to operate efficiently on their own.

The language experience approach to reading in many ways is in direct opposition to the philosophy of synthetic approaches. The stress is on the student's own experiences and interests and the representation of the language in print. In this orientation, the language experience approach and linguistic approaches share a common view — the text is speech written down.

Students are encouraged to tell stories to the teacher, either individually or in a small group setting. The teacher records the stories in the child's own language, indicating the authorship of each sentence if the story is a group effort. He or she then transcribes it and returns the story to the student(s) for reading and discussion. These experience stories are often bound into small books and form the source of reading vocabulary for each child. An example of such a story which might have developed in a small group of first-grade children is shown below:

Blueboy the Hampster

Mary: Blueboy is a hampster.

Marty: He lives in a cage in our classroom.

Tommy: Blueboy runs around and around in a little wheel.

Susie: Sometimes Blueboy likes to wash his face and fur. He licks himself all over.

Mary: Yesterday Blueboy had two little babies.

Marty: We were surprised!

Frank: We are going to change Blueboy's name.

All: We are going to call Blueboy Bluegirl from now on.

There is an early emphasis on daily writing, especially stories, for which each child's individual word bank proves useful.

From the analysis of student's writings and performance during these story and book sessions, skills instruction is planned for individuals or small groups, as in the individualized approach.

A teacher using the language experience approach may rely on one or more approaches for teaching sound-symbol relationships, including single-letter phonics. The emphasis, however, is on the meaningfulness of text and on helping students to develop an understanding of sound-symbol regularities through reading stories containing words with which they are familiar.

This necessarily brief sketch of the range of approaches to reading instruction has omitted numerous variations that have been tried within each approach. Many other approaches, such as *Words in Color*,⁶ Distar,⁷ Initial Teaching Alphabet (ITA)⁸ and so on⁹ have been attempted with little evidence to suggest a clear superiority of one program over another.

Regardless of the approach used to teach students beginning reading skills, if group instruction is a frequent activity the teacher is apt to follow the Directed Reading Activity (DRA), a 9-step instructional plan described in Table 2.

TABLE 2. ORGANIZATIONAL SCHEMES FOR READING

<i>Directed Reading Activity (DRA)</i>	<i>Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA)</i>
Capture interest and establish background *	Capture interest and establish background *
Preteach difficult vocabulary *	Preteach difficult vocabulary *
Set clear purposes *	Help <i>student</i> to set clear purposes *
Read silently *	Read silently *
Read aloud *	Discuss the story and Reread section of the story aloud to <i>verify</i> and <i>clarify</i> story content and interpretation *
Discussion *	Skill lesson (optional) *
Skill lesson (optional) *	Independent work/teacher assistance *
Independent work/teacher assistance *	Enrichment
Enrichment	

Source: Stauffer, Russell. *Directing the Reading-Thinking Process*. New York, Harper & Row, 1975.

Stauffer¹⁰ recommended a variation in this scheme, which he described as the Directed Reading-Thinking Activity (DR-TA). The differences between the DRA and DR-TA concern the degree to which the student is involved in setting his own purposes for reading the selection, and the purposes for oral reading in the reading group. Briefly, the teacher ordinarily plans to introduce, develop and conclude reading a story over a 3-day period. This is the time required to prepare the students for reading, to read and discuss the story, and to introduce or review skills.

On the first day the teacher attempts to generate student interest in the selection and, simultaneously, to establish a sufficient background of information to help the students comprehend what is going to be presented. These activities may include showing a film, reading topically-related selections from other books, previewing the assigned story, showing photographs, and holding open discussions. Preteaching difficult vocabulary usually requires the presentation of words in phrases taken from the story. Word meanings are clarified as the students are helped to decode the words using previously learned phonic and structural analysis skills.

On the second day the students are helped to set clear purposes for reading the story. This is usually accomplished by directing the students to examine the story title, to peruse the story itself, and then to suggest questions that might be answered by a more careful reading. The teacher supplies additional questions if the students omit key relationships. Students are next directed to read part, or all, of the story silently in an effort to answer their own questions and other questions that may arise. Under some circumstances, the teacher may read aloud before asking the students to read silently in order to provide strong contextual cues for the students to use when reading on their own. After a prescribed section of the story is read, the students discuss the content and attempt to respond to each others' questions. Discrepant or vague responses require rereading aloud to verify and clarify story content. Further reading aloud may be desirable either for diagnostic purposes or because the material lends itself to oral interpretation.

On the third day a lesson on reading skills may be planned, including instruction for students requiring special assistance from the teacher. Enrichment activities are often planned as a followup to the story (e.g., plays, puppet shows, art projects, independent research or further reading).

During the DRA and DR-TA, students are often assigned additional work to reinforce basic reading and writing skills. Often these activities are found in the workbook accompanying the basal reader. To the degree that the teacher utilizes these seatwork exercises sparingly, selectively

and with attention to the individual needs of students, these activities can be an effective means to bolster students' reading skills.

LIBRARIANS AND CHILDREN LEARNING TO READ

After this necessarily condensed overview of reading instruction, it may be helpful to focus on how the librarian can contribute to children's growth in reading performance. The major assertion of this paper is that students should know what reading is, have a desire to learn to read, and be taught effectively by well-trained teachers if they are to become effective, practicing readers. These variables, however, obviously reflect an ideal condition that does not exist for a significant proportion of our children. This fact is borne out by the numbers of students who have failed to learn to decode effectively in classrooms where other students have easily learned to decode. Some students seem able to decode well when asked to do so, but comprehend little of what they read. Perhaps less obvious, but no less serious, is the number of students who answer the teacher's questions and pass the tests, but who seldom *think* when they read. They seem passive, uncritical and bored with the material they are asked to read — they seem devoid of the desire to read. This is reflected in the number of adults who choose not to read once they leave school and the consequent absence of adult modeling behavior for reading.

How is it possible that the importance placed throughout the school years on becoming an effective reader can be so quickly and complacently set aside? Somehow, teachers and adults are failing to instill in youth the motivation to read. Here, perhaps more than in any other way, parents and librarians can affect children's reading performance without confusing or duplicating the instruction provided in the school.

The library contains books which are often viewed by the child as different from the basal reader used in schools. Libraries can be explored, revisited and enjoyed without the restrictions imposed by well-intentioned teachers, i.e., that books must be read thoroughly, on schedule and without error. Schools often make it too difficult to exercise the freedom to explore books on one's own, equating reading with top scholarship, obedience, grade-level performance or work completed on time. Libraries need not and should not put such restrictions between children and books.

Keeping in mind that the young child must value books to become a proficient, lifelong reader, librarians can create an atmosphere which beckons children to books rather than one that confronts them with the printed word. No child, regardless of reading level, should ever be made to feel that a book of his choice is too difficult or too easy for him. The

child should be allowed to select on the basis of his own interests and of perhaps some alternatives offered by the librarian. After all, the child's reasons for selecting the book may have little, if anything, to do with the book's readability.

Librarians have the opportunity to provide book-related experiences for children which schools often omit or deemphasize:

1. the freedom to be an individual reading a book of one's own choice, rather than an assigned basal reader;
2. the chance to explore topics of personal interest — rather than being faced with the task of selecting a book from a library limited in titles by lists that dictate what 9-year-old girls like to read;
3. the opportunity to select a book that is "too easy" because of wanting to be reassured that one does know something — despite the bad day in reading "that book that's too hard";
4. the experience of taking a book that has been read before and enjoyed because it feels good to know that this book is "yours";
5. the license to choose a book that is difficult because it has one intriguing picture that stimulates the imagination;
6. the power to ask for advice about books to read that might be fun, but to know that one need not be compelled to accept that advice; and
7. the experience of being treated like other students — as an intelligent, responsible, significant individual capable of making decisions.

Experiences like these may help students who have difficulty learning to read to persist until they not only learn how to read, but also discover the value of reading.

The four objectives of school reading programs should be recalled here: decoding skills, comprehension, enjoyment and desire to read. For many reasons, schools have tended to emphasize the first objective, wonder about the second, and all but ignore the latter two goals. The result has been that few people read critically; most people do not read at all. Since many parents have assigned to schools the total responsibility for teaching their children how to read, perhaps librarians can share more directly and consciously in the experience of helping children to discover the value and joy of reading.

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