Vowelectomy – A Fatal Reading Operation

by Mike Brunner, Consultant
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Though gaining ascendency in the 1930s, the look-say method of reading instruction reached its heyday between 1940 and 1955; however, it was discredited by subsequent professional research and exposed by Dr. Rudolph Flesch in 1955 with his expose *Why Johnny Can't Read*. The reading establishment did not admit it was wrong, but rather discarded its "look-say" label and went to a new one, the "eclectic approach" which was wedded to the slogan, "But we do teach phonics."

Unfortunately, new labels did not solve the reading crisis which was well established by 1955, but it did quiet the fears of many who thought that the reading establishment had recognized the error of its ways. Now the crisis did not abate, instead it got progressively worse, and public criticism was becoming more vocal. Then in 1967, Jeanne Chall of the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University, reviewing all of the valid research from 1910 to 1965, told the educational community what it did not want to hear. After five years of exhaustive research, she reported:

> My review of the research from the laboratory, the classroom and the clinic points to a need for a correction in beginning reading instruction methods. Most school children in the United States are taught by what I have termed a meaning-emphasis method. Yet the research from 1912 to 1965 indicated that a code-emphasis method—i.e., one that views beginning reading as essentially different from mature reading and emphasizes learning of the printed code for the spoken language – produces better results, at least up to the point where sufficient evidence seems to be available, the end of the third grade.
>
> The results are better, not only in terms of the mechanical aspects of literacy alone, as was once supposed, but also in terms of the ultimate goals of reading instruction—comprehension and possibly even speed of reading. The long existing fear that an initial code emphasis produces readers who do not read for meaning or with enjoyment is unfounded. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that better results in terms of reading for meaning are achieved with the programs that emphasize code at the start than with the programs that stress meaning at the beginning.

Dr. Chall did not say, however, how the code should be taught in order to get the best results, nor did she indicate approximately how long the initial instruction should take before a student becomes an independent reader. As a result of these omissions, the reading establishment this time responded by again changing labels (they're only good for about 10 to 15 years). The new label of reading reform was to be known as "psycholinguistics," advocated by Kenneth Goodman and Frank Smith. (Many of you will remember Kenneth Goodman as the one who said that if a child reads "pony" for "horse" it is all right. In fact, the child should be commended for making an intelligent miscue. The student is reading for "meaning" — certainly not the author's, but that is not of any consequence. Or is it?)

By 1978, however, Isabel Beck and Ellen McCaslin co-authored "An Analysis of Dimensions That Affect the Development of Code-breaking Ability in Eight Beginning Reading Programs" in which they analyzed four traditional basals and four "code-emphasis" or phonics basals as well as compared the two types.

This study was a bombshell for those who read it, but I would speculate very few administrators, if any teachers, read the report. (It may be ordered from the *Reading Reform Foundation*). This study made abundantly clear why the how-to of reading instruction in the traditional basal is so inadequate. In 1980 Susanna Pflaum and three other researchers from the University of Chicago did a quantitative analysis of the research literature published between 1965 and 1978 to determine the best method. (Yes, there is a single best method, the schools of education to the contrary notwithstanding.)

These studies, in fact all major studies comparing the relative superiority of intensive, synthetic and systematic phonics versus the traditional basal approach to teaching deciphering, have proven the superiority of the former to the latter. And one must keep in mind that **fluent and accurate deciphering is in part directly proportional to comprehending any text**. Granted, there are other critical factors involved in comprehension, but this does not negate the fact that **one cannot comprehend what one cannot decipher accurately**.

In light of this research and much heated controversy for 25 years, the inevitable question arises: How are teachers required to teach initial reading instruction as determined by the traditional basals which teachers are required to use? Keep In mind that 75 to 85 percent of the approximately 16,000 school districts in the United States use these reading programs. In short, how have the publishing companies responded to this research? Have they made the necessary changes?

To answer this question, I went to *Houghton Mifflin Reading Program*, 1981 edition. This basal was selected for analysis, since it is one of the top three or four in sales and because it is representative of the remaining traditional basal reading programs which school districts use. However, before analyzing the teachers' manuals for the first and second grades, I will share with you statements, and my responses to them, found in *Reading Research and the Houghton Mifflin Reading Program*, written by two of the basal's authors, William Durr and John Pikulski. This 23-page document answers 28 pertinent questions regarding beginning reading instruction based upon research. (The bibliography contains 239 entries.) This small publication establishes the instructional philosophy upon which the *Houghton Mifflin Reading Program* is constructed.

1. "...children come to school knowing the meanings of more than two thousand words—certainly enough to begin reading instruction. Some studies have estimated...over twenty thousand words." If these figures are correct, one can only be dismayed to learn that after one year of instruction the child has been taught to read only 314 words.

2. "...the materials read by students are necessarily restricted in vocabulary and sentence structure in the very beginning phases of learning to read." No wonder, since vowels are not taught explicitly until Level E, approximately at the beginning of the second semester of the first grade, 46 units after the first day of school. All words learned during this time must be learned by initial and/or final consonants, consonant clusters and digraphs; that is to say, they are taught as sight words, using context clues.

3. "*The Houghton Mifflin Reading Program* is a meaning-based, language-based program designed to build independence in reading and a life-long interest in reading." My response to this statement is a question: What is a "nonmeaning-based" and "nonlanguage-based" program? As you will see, *The Houghton Mifflin Reading* Program does nothing to foster independence

and a life-long interest in reading, since the entire alphabetic code is not taught and what is taught is done in such a desultory way over a two-year period of time.

4. "However, it is inappropriate to conclude that children entering school should be taught the names of all the letters of the alphabet as a necessary prerequisite to learning to read." This is an extraordinary statement in light of the fact that the readiness program does precisely that — teaches all the letter names.

5. "And direct instruction in phonics has been shown superior to a non-direct approach in which children are expected to discover letter-sound associations." The authors quote Phyllis Weaver (*Research Within Reach*) who said that research favors "...early and systematic code instruction over a whole word approach." What you will see, however, is that this program, like most basals in use today, does not teach phonics in the sense of teaching the sound of the phonograms and then teaching the blending of phonemes to arrive at a known sound or sequence of sounds which has meaning as a recognizable word. **It is an egregious misuse of English to lead the reader to believe that direct instruction in systematic phonics is employed when vowels, not to mention vowel and mixed digraphs, are not taught at all until the second semester of the first grade**. What Houghton Mifflin, as well as most other publishers of basal reading programs has done, is perform a "vowelectomy" upon the English language. **To teach children to read words by ignoring vowels is to teach sight words**. "Vowel" comes from the Latin "vox" which means voice, and a voiceless word is a sight word by definition.

6. "Studies proving that children should be taught letter-sound associations in words rather than in isolation have accumulated." "...it has been shown that the production of consonant phonemes in isolation is significantly more difficult than production in familiar word context. Children show little direct transfer from isolated sounds to words... Gleitman and Rorin have shown that it Is impossible to isolate the sounds for certain letters, particularly the 'stop' consonants such as b, d, and p, without distorting the sounds... Other research has shown that the common sense view, that is, a little segment of sound corresponding to each letter of a word is false." The effectiveness of teaching letter sounds within the context of the word as opposed to teaching them in isolation is patently false. The Pflaum study, cited above, involved analyzing 97 studies conducted between 1965 and 1978, to determine the effectiveness of the experimental methods with control treatments, most of which were represented by the traditional basal, and secondly, to measure the mean effect size between methods. The results? The authors stated unequivocally that "one specific treatment, sound-symbol blending, made a significantly greater impact on reading than the other experimental treatments." **Sound-symbol blending means pronouncing phonemes in isolation**. In fact, reading achievement was about three times greater by using this method. I would strongly question the validity of Houghton Mifflin's research when one can pronounce with ease a "stop" consonant at the end of a word without distorting the sound. Why then assume it cannot be pronounced at the beginning of a word in isolation without distortion? The difficulty of learning to pronounce phonemes in isolation is really irrelevant, but perhaps it should be pointed out that literally several hundreds of thousands of children each year in the primary grades—urban and rural, high and low S.E.S., migrants and E.S.L. students, within five weeks can learn to read in isolation the 70 common phonograms used to spell almost all common English words, as well as to write them from dictation without seeing them. These are children who have been taught with the Spalding method (*The Writing Road to Reading*). **It seems strange that basal program developers assume that it takes two to three years to teach what should be taught in a few weeks**. The notion in regard to a sound association for each letter is of course false. The authors have created a straw man on this point, since there are

only 25 single letters and there are 39 common two-letter phonograms. In some cases, these digraphs do not represent any of the sounds associated with the individual letters making up the phonogram. For the authors to put forth the "common sense view" that each letter corresponds to a segment of sound is ludicrous. Anybody who knows anything at all about English spelling would never claim this uncommon and erroneous view. Lastly, children will not transfer from isolated sounds to words if they haven't been taught consistently how to blend, and this they have not been taught how to do, as the study of any traditional basal program will reveal.

7. "Research consistently supports emphasizing, ...the letter-sound associations for consonants rather than those for vowels...children who receive initial emphasis on consonants score significantly higher in reading achievement than children who receive initial emphasis on vowels." Again, another straw man has been created. Unless one is teaching sight words, "initial emphasis" is irrelevant. **In order to decipher accurately any word in the English language, one must understand from the beginning the vowel system and how it functions since there is not one syllable in any English word that does not have a vowel!**

In order to understand any basal system, it is best to study the teachers' manuals. In the Houghton Mifflin first and second grade program there are eight volumes, each comprising a level (A-H). It takes two years theoretically to teach a child to be a somewhat independent reader. These volumes are divided as follows: *Getting Ready to Read* (Readiness, A); *Bears, Balloons, Boats* (Preprimers, Levels B, C and D respectively); *Sunshine, Moonbeams* (Primers, Levels E & F respectively); and *Skylights, Towers* (2nd grade, Levels G and H respectively).

One potential problem for most children in learning letter-sound associations is confusing letters which look alike; for example, "d/b", "g/p", etc. The solution to the problem is simple: separate them! Houghton Mifflin fails to recognize the potential problem, or assumes none exists. In Level B the authors teach "d" in Unit 7 and "b" in Unit 10. Level A is not too much help either. The letters "b" and "d" are separated by the study of only two other phonemes, "f" and "g".

Another dilemma in reading instruction is whether to teach the multiple sounds of a phonogram together or to teach the different sounds at different times during the year. Houghton Mifflin doesn't teach vowels explicitly at all until Level E (second semester, 1st grade). This is particularly interesting, since up to Level E the child is expected to read 102 words without any knowledge of vowels. It should be pointed out, however, there is no problem of teaching the multiple sounds of single letters and letter-teams if phonics is applied to written spelling instead of to reading. In this situation, pupils quickly learn (within kindergarten and 1st grade) how the vowel system works: i.e., under what conditions a vowel represents a given sound. Concerning consonants, It would seem appropriate, for example, to teach the two sounds of "c" together since there are so many common words that use both sounds, but Houghton Mifflin teaches the "hard" c in Level A, but withholds the teaching of the "soft" sound until Level D, which means the student won't be able to read words like city, cent, cycle and pencil until 36 units later, or if persistent and with unusual inductive reasoning ability, the child may discover the "e-i-y" rule! (In reality it won't make much difference anyway whether or not the child learns this rule at this time because vowels haven't been introduced yet.)

All things considered; Houghton Mifflin can be complimented for introducing the consonant digraph fairly early. In Level B "th" is taught in Unit 2 and "sh" In Unit 7, but "ch" is not taught until 20 units later In Unit 9 of Level C. Sorry Charlie, no chicken, cheese or cherries.

Perhaps the biggest hurdles in program development, besides determining method and techniques, is determining the sequences of phonograms to be taught, and when in the course of

instruction they will be taught. Usually program developers start with single letters which include at least the teaching of "short" vowels. The rationale is simple: Developers want children to realize that they have to ability to read and write words that they have not been taught – in short, to discover new words. The ability of students to do this provides great satisfaction as well as to stimulate motivation. Unfortunately, Houghton Mifflin does not allow children this option. As Beck and McCaslin point out, "the children in the programs can read only words that they have learned as sight words" since the initial instruction in vowels is not presented until late, and then not in a meaningful way.

In my foregoing observations, I have used the term, phonogram. This term is subject to several definitions. I define it, as a few other program developers do, as a single letter or a fixed combination of two, three or four letters which represent one or more phonemes. There are approximately 70 common phonograms to encode most English words, excluding technical and foreign words. Though there is no agreement among program developers as to what the essential phonograms are, it is depressing to see what Houghton Mifflin considers of so little importance as to exclude them from direct instruction in two years of instruction. (The charts at the beginning of each teacher's manual, which give new and reviewed skills, were used.)

For long vowels Houghton Mifflin omitted "e", "i" and "a" — the latter two when they end a syllable. Conspicuous by their absence in the vowel digraph and diphthong department are: "ou", "aw", "oy", "oi", "ie", "oe", and "au". By the way, they're not taught in the 3rd grade unless the child is fortunate enough to be placed in a good remedial program.

For vowels controlled by "r", there are two omissions — "or' preceded by "w" and "ear" followed by another consonant. With the exception of the words worn and sworn, "or" when preceded by "w" will always say "er". "Ear" followed by another consonant, will, with the exception of heart, always say "er". So, unless a six- or seven-year-old makes this discovery, the child is out of luck when it comes to: earth, earn, early, rehearse, work, worm, worse, worth, etc.

The phonogram "ag" is taught only as part of "ing". This is very inadequate instruction since "ng", with the exceptions of English and England, is always preceded by a short vowel. Moreover) with the exceptions of "strength" and "length", those short vowels are limited to "a", "i", "o" and "u". In fact, some programmers recommend teaching "ang", "ing", "ong" and "ling" s three-letter phonograms, not bad pedagogy either!

Nowhere could I find "tch" and "dge" taught as phonograms, yet they're always used to follow a short vowel. Perhaps the program developers considered these phonograms of little significance, but not to recommend directly the teaching of the third sounds of "a", "o", and "u" is serious. To do so excludes such high frequency words as: want, wash, what, to, do, who, shoe, put, pull, push and full — just to name a few. And nowhere could I find where it was taught that when "i" and "o" are followed by two consonants they may say their names (long vowel sounds), e.g., old, child, most, both, find, kind, roll, sign, etc. A rather useful bit of information, don't you think?

There are essentially two skills which every child (and many adults) must learn in order to comprehend the printed word. They must know the essential phonograms in terms of the phonemes which are associated with each, and they must be able to blend or synthesize these phonemes into words. This two-phase operation must become an automatic process. The final and critical question is: "How does Houghton Mifflin teach this process?" For that matter, how does any developmental reading program recommend teaching this process? The answer is of paramount importance to successful reading instruction and therefore to successful reading. From Level B to Level D, 94 new words are taught by using context clues and consonant

substitution. This involves 45 units of instruction. Levels E & F (45 units) do not digress from this method of teaching new words except for introducing vowels in isolation. However, the instruction does not (and this is an important point) stress how the vowels function but rather stresses the tact that vowels have different sounds and that, depending on the sound they represent, they are either short or long. (Of course, they are no more *short* or *long* than they are *thin* or *fat*, but that's another matter.) Further, since blending phonemes has at no time been taught, the meager information about vowels is totally worthless.

Therefore, we must look at the method of using consonant substitution in conjunction with context clues, in terms of why this method is worthless for the reader as a method for deciphering. When teachers use context clues to teach one or two syllable words, they will be relatively successful, but when students attempt to read words that they have not seen before and no one is around to tell them what the word is, then the use of context clues as a method of deciphering will fail most often to provide the correct word. Have you ever observed this phenomenon? The explanation is simple but not obvious to most teachers. Suppose the teacher wants to teach the word dish. She will review the end sound "sh" by writing two or three words on the board that end in "sh". These words, the students have already "read." She will tell them to say them softly to themselves, as long that they listen for the last sound. Finally she will write on the board the new word that she wants to teach, in this instance, the word, "dish," after which she will tell the students that she will give them a sentence, leaving out a word which they are to supply by using their letter-sound knowledge. (Supposedly they all know the sound for "d" which they were taught in the readiness program.) Her sentence is: Doris filled the _____ with fruit. What is the word? Of course, dish! How do they know it is not bowl? (Wrong beginning and ending sounds.). How do they know it is not dash? (Makes no sense). The reason the teacher can frequently get the correct response is because she provides a sentence which makes closure relatively easy.

But what happens when the student encounters words in which context cannot help, which is most of the time? He will simply guess and come up with a word that will bring meaning to the sentence. But the purpose of reading is to obtain meaning from the text, not to bring meaning to it. If the child cannot provide a word that makes sense, then he will provide any word or skip it. Remedial reading teachers hear this done every day.

The value of this method is well illustrated by Dr. Walter McGinitie, Teachers College, Columbia University, who developed an analogue lesson, which required the same logical mental process as that required by the Houghton Mifflin method for deciphering words. In his experiment he used six geometric forms, each of which had its own color. He wrote:

> The teacher is instructed to write the word *girls* on the board. The teacher then says, "You can find out what this word is. With what consonant does it begin? With what consonant does it end? You know the sounds that g and r and i and s stand for. I am gong to say something and leave out this word at the end. When I stop, think of a word that begins with a sound g stands for, ends with the sounds r and i and s stand for, and makes sense with what I said." Obviously, that instruction is rather complex for most adults, let alone for most six-year-olds. The analogue for that bit of instruction was as follows: The children were shown several rows of color patches, and they were told to "Find the row that begins with the color that goes with rectangle, ends with the colors that go with triangle, diamond, and square, and that has a wavy line under it." They couldn't do that either, of course.

From my analysis of the *Houghton Mifflin Reading Program*, I am convinced that it falls on three critical points: 1) It does not begin to teach the necessary grapheme/phoneme

correspondences. 2) It provides no instruction in the essential skill of synthesizing phonemes or phonograms. 3) It falls totally in providing a working knowledge of how the English vowel system works, and without this knowledge many will never learn to read effectively, much less write English.

Beck and McCaslln concluded in their 1978 study of traditional basal reading programs that "a decade after Chall (1967), we do not see the basal programs as being essentially different, along the dimensions we considered, from the way she described them. It is certainly true that recent basal programs start phonics earlier, but since we have shown that their brands of phonics are probably useless for children in our target population, these children are still receiving reading instruction from a sight-method approach."

My analysis of the 1981 edition of the *Houghton Mifflin Reading Program* revealed no substantial improvements. When one considers that the primary children in the United States are receiving this "useless" instruction in at least 75% of our 16,000 school districts, then why should we be surprised at a high level of illiteracy which costs us literally billions of tax dollars in order to deal with remedial instruction, juvenile delinquency, adult crime, unemployment and welfare? Illiteracy begins with first grade instruction with the teaching of sight words, i.e., context clues and guessing.

In terms of instructional methods, Houston Mifflin is representative of all major basals. If you doubt this, make your own analysis. The stories may change and the pictures may change, but what has not changed is the sight-word method of instruction, the crippling thalidomide of reading pedagogy.

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Here are a couple pictures of Michael Brunner

from the1981 *Reading Informer Conference Report.*

An informal Mike Brunner
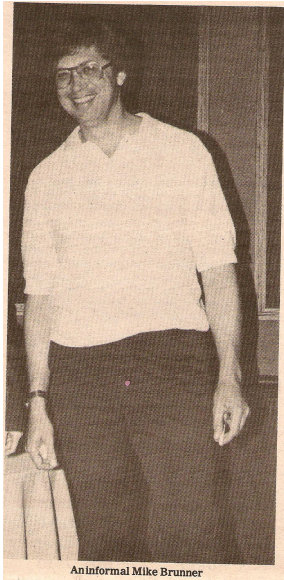
There was a Note in the same magazine:

Mike Brunner Takes Post with N.I.E.

Just at press time we have learned that Mike Bruner has accepted a position as Senior Associate, Teaching and Learning Division, National Institute of Education, Washington, D.C.

Mike, well-known to may RRFers, begins his new job about Sept. 1. He has been serving as consultant to the Idaho State Department of Education.

The description of his new duties:

•Provide senior scientific leadership to national research programs on reading and reading instruction.

•Review, analyze, and synthesize the finding of discipline-based research studies in psychology, linguistics and education to determine the implications for reading instruction, and conceive, design and initiate new research projects for proposals in reading;

•Serve as a nationally recognized author on research in reading and how reading is taught.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

February 20, 2010

This excellent analysis of the 1981 *The Houghton Mifflin Reading Program* was taken from the Vol. 10, No. 1 – September, 1982 *Reading Informer*, 21st *Annual Conference of the Reading Reform Foundation,* July 9-11, Toronto Ontario, Canada.

Many thanks to Kathy Diehl, former Research Director for the RRF, and Samuel L. Blumenfeld for sending me several boxes of *Reading Informers* and other materials from the RRF.

In my 21 years in public education, I saw every problem Brunner mentioned. I was trained in the whole-language methodology. Even to this day, practically every kindergarten and first-grade teacher subjects his or her students to massive doses of sight-word memorization. I have even heard teachers tell students to skip vowels and guess the words from context and pictures.

I wish that Brunner's indictment of the basal programs of the 1980's were a thing of the past. Unfortunately, of the big-name publishing companies, I have yet to find a basal program that does not commit the bad teaching practices that Mr. Brunner enumerates here. For reasons that go beyond my powers to comprehend, some of the formerly good phonics basals have suffered severely in current revisions. It appears that they believe that a little whole-language is harmless, little realizing that their otherwise good phonics program suffers significant degrading because of their curious refusal to teach phonics-first sans sight-word memorization.

I would dearly love to see what kind of review Mr. Brunner would give to the current so-called phonics basals. I am afraid it wouldn't be much different from the 1981 Houghton Mifflin review. Perhaps he could be induced to enter the arena once again to share with us his fine-tuned analytical abilities. I should be delighted to learn that my disappointment with the currently popular "phonics" basals is unfounded.

Michael Brunner was a master of Spalding's *Writing Road to Reading*. He still recommends that program. I have taught it and can testify that it is an effective phonics program, albeit not the easiest.

The principles laid down in this speech remain the gold standard for judging today's basal reading programs.

Mr. Brunner has published his own phonogram method: *Phonics Made Simple*. It is available from Mott Media.

I taught elementary bilingual, secondary Spanish, dyslexia, and Amateur Radio (NG5W) classes for the Ector County ISD for 21 years. I also taught 4th grade, Spanish, remedial reading, cursive handwriting, Texas and American History, and Bible at the Odessa Christian school for 13 years. At the end of the 2018-2019 school year, I retired again to dedicate my time to tutoring, research, and publishing.

I recommend Hazel Logan Loring's *Reading Made Easy with Blend Phonics for First Grade*, and the accompanying 62 stories in my *Blend Phonics Lessons and Stories*. Information on the books can be found on my websites www.blendphonics.org and www.donpotter.net. This program teaches all 44 English speech sounds and all their major spelling correspondences in the **first semester of first grade**.

Here is Mr. Brunner's video, "Retarding America: The Imprisonment of Potential"

https://youtu.be/c-q79JTOE0s

Here is the research behind the video. This is basically the same information at his book, *Retarding American: The Imprisonment of Potential.*

https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED361646.pdf

Here is a link to Beck, Isabel, and Ellen McCaslin. *An Analysis of Dimensions that Affect the Development of Code-Breaking Ability in Eight Beginning Reading Programs*. Learning Research and Development Center, University of Pittsburgh, 1978.

https://archive.org/details/ERIC_ED197322/mode/2up

Here is Chall's *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967)

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