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PHONICS VS. LOOK-SAY: ... is the end in sight? by Raymond E. Laurita

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"The price of continued conflict can only be paid for by the children."

Over the past decade and more a serious debate has raged both in and out of education concerning the beat method for the teaching of reading. One side argues the whole word or "look-say" technique makes the acquisition of reading skills natural and in keeping with the child's normal language patterns. The opposition steadfastly maintains that what is needed is some form of instruction in phonies as the best way to introduce children to their early language experiences.

Probably more words pro and con have been written about this subject than any other single aspect of the entire education process in all areas of the curriculum. The look-say adherents pointed to the majority of children who had learned to read quite admirably while the phonies group pointed to the many other millions who were illiterate or the fantastic numbers of annual school drop-outs, or the plight of the businessman who complained he couldn't find a young person who could spell or write a complete English sentence.

Undoubtedly the advocates of both the left and the right in this discussion had valid arguments and they were equally sincere in their claims of superiority for a particular approach. The point of this article isn't to dispute or support completely either side but rather to put the matter in better perspective and see if perhaps those who continue the argument aren't "flogging a dead horse." That there has been a subtle but clear-cut shift in emphasis in reading instruction over the past several years is obvious to anyone in the field. And it is agreed by most that this shift is very definitely in the best interests of the entire American student body.

The most productive aspect of the whole unhappy controversy has been the rise in importance of the reading specialist and remedial therapist whose job is to cope with the millions who cannot learn to read because of environment, poor teaching, or physical or emotional factors. These people are in fantastic demand and a move is afoot in the country's universities to mass-produce them. The schools have more or less been guilty of throwing the problem in their laps and asking them to come up with easy solutions.

Yet the interesting phenomenon is that educators seem to have been oblivious for years to the findings of the researchers in the field of reading. Education in general failed for a long time to profit from the discoveries of those laboring in classrooms and clinics trying to find ways to piece together the broken parts and return whole, productive human beings to the schools.

What have the remedial people told us about children they work with? What are the problems of the 30 to 35 percent of pupils who apparently cannot learn to read adequately or at all? And how can this information be used to help in the formulation of more humane and positive approaches to the infinitely complex job of learning how to read?

There is a growing body of literature in the field of remediation and from it can be drawn a number of valid conclusions concerning reading problems. There are a number of common factors, repetitive enough to allow some general conclusions to be drawn.

The child who is experiencing difficulty is deficient in at least one and usually more than one of the following areas: directionality, perception, association, discrimination and memory. These terms are used almost daily by most teachers but only the clinician, researcher or remedial therapist has sufficiently lengthy or deep contact with children who are abnormally deficient to see patterns developing. Because of this close contact, the therapist is better able to understand the deficiency and the role it plays in the over-all problem of reading retardation.

The first of these areas, directionality, is an overworked and often misunderstood term which refers generally to the ability of the child to respond in a learned manner to the left-right flow of language. Without complete facility in this ability, children are doomed to the most unbelievable confusion.

It isn't a natural skill people are born with but one that must be learned by constant instruction and practice. And although research has been carried out for over a century into the exact mechanics of the process whereby most people learn to read from left to right with apparent ease, there is still no definitive explanation why so many others have such great difficulty learning to either see, hear or write language in a consistently left-right pattern.

What has been learned by the great experts in the field who have experimented with techniques to cope in a practical way with those afflicted with this aspect of reading difficulty? There is almost universal agreement that the most successful methods of treatment are those which stress the individual characteristics of words**,** that stress the individual component parts of words rather than the overall configuration or shape. Typical of these methods are the Fernald Technique, the VAKT (**v**isual, **a**uditory, **k**inesthetic, **t**actile) approach championed by Margery Seddon Johnson, and the highly structured approaches of Bloomfield and Gillingham.

All these and others have in common the learning of either the letter names and/or sounds of the individual elements so that words can be constructed out of the component parts rather than learned as wholes. The end results of such teaching are reinforced abilities to view, to hear and to write in a more consistent left-right manner.

The second area of difficulty for the reading problem is deficient ability to perceive language in a meaningful way. Perception is defined as the process of gaining knowledge through the senses of the existence and properties of matter and the external world. Unfortunately, most adults are either unaware or indifferent concerning the extreme difficulty many children experience in this area. It is a process infinitely complex and incompletely understood, yet which those in the fields of reading and psychology recognize as a factor of great significance in the total reading problem of many children.

If a child were partially blind or deaf, he wouldn't he expected to perceive shapes or hear sounds accurately or at all. Yet it remains a fact that an undetermined number of otherwise normal children cannot either see the shape of words accurately or hear their sounds with accuracy or consistency. These children suffer every day because they are asked to perform tasks in school which are not only difficult but perhaps impossible. Often a child who exhibits an avoidance reaction – who appears to have lost interest or given up – is the child who in his early language experience was asked to perform just such an impossible task.

Once again, the best and most successful methods developed to help children with perceptual difficulty are those which go from the particular to the general, which help the child develop his abilities with the least complex forms before proceeding to the more involved. They are those which help him learn to perceive individual components accurately and consistently before learning to see and hear meaningful groupings.

The methods mentioned already have proven useful in assisting the child to learn how to make the relationships necessary for accurate perception. Also, beneficial and now coming into widespread use are the visual perceptual materials of Marianne Frostig which again stress step-by-step integration of stimuli. She writes in the manual accompanying her materials: "This sequential integrating process, which is sometimes referred to as pattern vision, is usually so swift that the perceiver seems to experience all steps simultaneously."

The reason underlying the introduction of words as wholes in the first place was based on evidence supplied by the Gestalt psychologists who maintained that since humans appeared to respond immediately to shapes in their entirety, the most logical and efficient way to teach reading was by the use of whole words rather than by first introducing the letters or sounds.

This was a very tenuous foundation to base an almost universally accepted form of reading instruction to begin with. And now there appears to be a considerable body of writing and psychological thought that disputes, at least in part, the theoretical basis of the idea of immediate Gestalt. Indeed, it may be that children do not perceive wholes immediately or in every case, but rather that this ability to learn whole shapes is a product of learning and maturity and that the best way to introduce language is via the individual letters and/or sounds of the alphabet.

Dr. D. O. Hebb of McGill University offers the theory that initial perceptual learning isn't immediate at all but proceeds instead in very minute steps and in a gradual and accumulating manner. He refers to the process as "serial apprehension" and bases his findings on research carried on over the past forty years. He writes: "it is possible that the normal infant goes through the same process (serial apprehension) and that we are able to see a square as such in a single glance only as a result of a complex learning. The notion seems unlikely, because of the utter simplicity of such perception to the normal adult."

In the face of two such conflicting theories one can easily see why so many question the use of the whole word technique in, as Dr. A. J. Harris has written, "Every popular set of readers in America today."

The third area in which the disabled child finds himself deficient concerns association, the ability to connect consistent individuality and meaning to language symbols. One of man's pre-eminent achievements occurred when he first learned it was possible to attach a consistent concrete meaning to an abstract printed symbol. The advantage this discovery gave him has led man to the point where the ability to understand the printed symbol is an essential prerequisite to success in life. Man has ceased being able to function without the use of printed communication.

With regard to reading, the ability to associate meaning with symbol is perhaps the most difficult and important single task the child is asked to do in his entire school career, for without it the whole hierarchy of developmental skills we have so carefully organized is meaningless. Until the child learns the letters on the page stand for something concrete and consistent, he is unable to progress.

Association, difficult as it is, can be mastered by some children even before they enter school. But for many, many others it is a long arduous journey. Some experience severe difficulty in even beginning to comprehend that the series of lines and circles the teacher points to has any consistent meaning whatsoever or is in any way different from the scribbles he and his friends playfully place on their paper. Others seem to be able to learn that a few word shapes stand for some particular concrete objects but become hopelessly bogged down when the vocabulary load becomes even the least bit varied. For these children the process of relating meaning to symbol is extremely difficult because of their confused, immature ability to make consistent associations.

The journey once again for those suffering this form of deficiency is from the simple to the complex, from learning individual letters and sounds to the eventual mastering of letter and sound groupings. The same methods which work to improve directionality and perception have also been most useful in helping children to improved associative skills. Children learning to read need language experiences that will assist them in making correct associations gradually and logically so that with physical and intellectual maturity they will be prepared to learn at a more realistic rate.

One of the great misconceptions adults make is to project onto the child abilities which are not his. Too many think, for example, that when a child learns even before school that a shape such as "cat" stands for the concept cat, he is aware immediately of the complexity of what he sees and hears. Adults tend to believe that the shape the child discerns and that which he observes are the same, or that the child is aware that the shape "cat" is comprised of three separate, distinct and unchanging visual and auditory symbols in an exact sequence. To assume this is the ultimate in naiveté for it is imputing to the immature child a degree of sophistication that will not be his for a number of years.

The fourth area of deficiency for the disabled child concerns his ability to discriminate, to both see and hear the tiny differences between words which make them unique among all others. Assuming the child is able to perceive the shape of a word clearly, and that he is viewing it in a consistent left- right pattern and that he is able to make correct associations, he still has a task of immense complexity laid out for him. He must still have a degree of discriminatory ability that is highly developed to enable him to recognize the differences in words, especially those most common ones with which he has frequent contact.

To ask the immature child to see the miniscule change that occurs in such words as so-as-is-in-on-an-no-am-me-we or between five-fire-fine-find is often asking him to perform an operation that is beyond him. Add to this the practical fact that alphabet training to assist in this difficult process of differentiation is usually delayed until sometime after the child has started reading. And to complicate the problem even further, the child has first been exposed to the visual aspects of language so that his initial reaction to the stimulus presented by a word is to rely on the purely visual appearance of the word without any assistance from auditory clues.

Once again, the principal methods used by remedial therapists in attacking this most difficult problem are those which rely on retraining the child to recognize consistently the individual letters of the alphabet. This training is usually reinforced by simultaneous learning of the sounds of the letters. Teaching the child with deficient discrimination skills is a most frustrating job, for the problem is almost always accompanied by directional difficulty and confused associations. When a child cannot remember consistently the difference between a b-d-p-q-g or between n-v-w-m-n-r-h he is indeed a problem, for he is continually receiving misleading clues from the words he observes on the printed page.

The last area of general deficiency relates to memory. Children suffering from impaired ability may find it difficult to remember the names of the letters, the sounds of letters, or the names, sounds and appearance of words to be written. The degree of difficulty children manifest varies from moderate to severe in the case of the brain injured or organically-disturbed child. Instruction in helping them to improve their ability in this function is, as in all the other areas, usually limited to techniques which enable the child to first learn the names and sounds of letters then very simple and regular words and finally the more complex and irregular words.

With regard to impaired memory, it is often difficult to isolate deficient operational ability from poor performance due to failure in one or more of the other areas mentioned. The child who cannot perceive accurately, associate consistently, discriminate faultlessly or travel always from left to right cannot be expected to develop normal skill in the area of memory.

It has been clearly demonstrated in the research that exists that for the brain-injured, the mentally-retarded, the slow learner, the deprived child, those with deficient sight and hearing and a host of others, that the most logical approach to reading isn't one that exposes them initially to words as wholes. The question then arises: How are all these children to be isolated at the outset of instruction to provide them with the kind of teaching best suited to their needs? Pedagogues are in universal agreement that we ought to fit the instruction to the child. But to design, organize and carry out a massive screening program that would sort out all the millions of children in these categories is not possible within our present system of educational organization.

If this is true, then the only alternative would seem to be to continue to be plagued with the millions of children who yearly experience difficulty learning to read and whose accumulated ills grow until they either drop out of school or stay on to stagger through to graduation. These unfortunates spend the majority of their time making themselves and all around them miserable because they quite rightly hate school for what it has failed to do.

But there is a better solution, one which as mentioned earlier has already begun to come to pass. There is a discernible shift in American education away from methods which primarily focus attention at the outset on the total configuration of words. New methods are instead concerned with the child’s initial ability to perceive the individual characteristics of language prior to or simultaneous with experience with more complex forms.

The linguistic approach fostered by Charles Fries and others, the use of color associations advocated by Banatyne and Gattegno, the Diacritical Marking System, the Progressive Choice method of Dr. Myron Woolman, the Initial Teaching Alphabet developed by Sir James Pitman, and a multitude of other highly structured approaches emphasizing the early teaching of phonies. All these ideas are attempts not to throw out the idea of using whole words in reading instruction, for it is a fact that children need to develop the ability to learn words rapidly once they have gained a degree of maturity in the visual, auditory and kinesthetic areas.

What is revolutionary about them is that they utilize the research that exists in an attempt to suit the methods used to the entire student body, not just those blessed with the complex readiness skills requisite for learning words at sight. Because of the nature of these approaches, learning to read becomes truly developmental.

Because of the structured nature of these approaches, children develop the ability to learn sequentially. Attention is drawn of necessity to the individual characteristics of words at the outset, before the child has the opportunity to respond solely to configuration without prior awareness of first, the left-right directional flow of language; second, the logical structure which is very definitely there to be observed and learned; and third, the specific distinguishing characteristics which make each word in the language unalterably different from each other word. Once children have facility in these basic skills, they are able to profit from the acquisition of whole words.

It is also of great importance to point out that the use of these methods of instruction is in no way discriminatory toward the children who can learn whole words at the outset. The evidence is in fact that these children are capable of learning *no matter what method is used*. And further, there are many studies extant which lead to the conclusion that not only would the disabled child learn better by the use of structured, linguistically oriented methods, but so also would the remainder of the student body.

The conclusion to be drawn from what has been said is quite clear. Education must heed the warnings of those who work with the millions of students who cannot learn at present and find variant methods of language instruction which do not place an insuperable burden on so many children. Techniques which discriminate against this segment of the school population really need to be drastically revised.

The truth is there is room for both disputants in the phonics-look-say controversy. What is needed is a calm reappraisal of all the arguments pro and con. What is needed is a spirit of educational echumenism so those on both sides can sit down and work together to find what is truly best for the students in our schools.

A careful examination will show there is no clear evidence to prove indisputably that children profit at the outset of instruction by learning whole words rather than by being exposed to some form of phonic-linguistic-structural approach. On the other hand, there is a multitude of research that strongly indicates that millions of children *cannot* learn by this method and are in many cases irreparably damaged by exposure to whole configurations without sufficient maturity. As Dr. Hilde Mosse puts it, “The whole word method does its greatest harm by being applied too early.”

Let those both in and out of education who have drawn hard, fast battle lines to continue the fight retreat instead for renewed study. The price of continued conflict can only be paid for by the children who remain to be taught. The obligation lies on the shoulders of all interested to find the best method for all students.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

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Everything Raymond Laurita ever wrote has a timeless quality about it. Although the Look-Say reading method (Dick and Jane) is no longer with us in the exact form Mr. Laurita is criticizing here, the basic principles he elucidates apply to much of today's reading instruction. There is little essential difference between the Dick and Jane whole word method Laurita exposes and modern Whole Language (now called Balanced Literacy and Guided Reading).

Perhaps the most insane practices that continues classrooms across the country is the almost universal custom of drilling kindergarten and first grade students in Dolch and Fry sight words divorced from careful attention to the spellings.

Further massive confusion is generated by the inexplicable fact that the classroom teachers and scientists use the term "sight words" with totally different connotations. **Teachers** consider *sight words*, words to be taught by sight. **Scientists** considers *sight words*, words read at sight. Confusion abounds!

Anyone conversant with the newest research into science of reading by such distinguished leaders in the field as Dr. David Kilpatrick, Dr. Louisa Moats, Dr. Keith Stanovich, Dr. Stanislas Dehaene, Dr. Daniel T. Willingham, and Dr. Mark Seidenberg to name a few, cannot help but see the relevance of Mr. Lauita's three main points.

If Mr. Laurita's plea would have been heeded in 1967, America would not be plagued with a major literacy crisis today.

For more brilliant articles like this one from the pen of Mr. Laurita visit my websites below.

www.donpotter.net
www.blendphonics.org

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