Reading the Past: Historical Antecedents to Contemporary Reading Methods and Materials

Arlene Barry*
Reading the Past: Historical Antecedents to Contemporary Reading Methods and Materials

Arlene Barry

Abstract

This article addresses the International Reading Association’s foundational knowledge requirement that educators recognize historical antecedents to contemporary reading methods and materials. The historical overview presented here highlights the ineffective methods and restrictive materials that have been discarded and the progress that has been made in the development of more effective and inclusive reading materials. In addition, tributes are paid to seldom-recognized innovators whose early efforts to improve reading instruction for their own students resulted in important change still evident in materials used today.
Reading the Past: Historical Antecedents to Contemporary Reading Methods and Materials

Arlene L. Barry, Ph.D.
University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas

Abstract
This article addresses the International Reading Association’s foundational knowledge requirement that educators recognize historical antecedents to contemporary reading methods and materials. The historical overview presented here highlights the ineffective methods and restrictive materials that have been discarded and the progress that has been made in the development of more effective and inclusive reading materials. In addition, tributes are paid to seldom-recognized innovators whose early efforts to improve reading instruction for their own students resulted in important change still evident in materials used today.

Why should an educator be interested in the history of literacy? It has been frequently suggested that knowing history allows us to learn from the past. Historian Carl Kaestle (1995) took a less global view when he noted that while “history cannot tell us the answers, it may provide some understanding of the problems” (p. 330). For decades, reading scholars have argued about the best method for teaching reading. Should teachers use phonics? A whole-language approach? Both? Neither? This question spawned the “Reading Wars” and “The Great Debate” (Chall, 1967). Because the debate continued to rage, Chall (1983) returned to it when she suggested that both phonics and whole-word approaches have their places in reading instruction. She posits that a different emphasis is required at different stages of a reader’s development. Thus we have balanced literacy. The friction associated with these debates spurred the International Reading Association (2004) on to include in Standard 1: Foundational Knowledge, the requirement that educators “Recognize historical antecedents to contemporary reading methods and materials” (p. 9).
Additionally, a Kansas Department of Education Knowledge Indicator requires that, “The reading specialist recognizes that literacy can be a means for transmitting moral and cultural values” (Kansas State Department of Education, 2006, p. 5). The purpose of this article is to discuss these requirements: the historical antecedents to contemporary reading methods and materials, and the values those antecedent materials conveyed. Primary source materials used for this research are from the University of Kansas, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, Charles and E. Jennifer Monaghan Collection on the History of Reading in the United States.

**Alphabet Method**

At the birth of our country, predominant values present in Colonial reading materials were Christian, Protestant, and Puritan. A child’s printed introduction to Christianity was typically the hornbook, which was named for the translucent horn used to protect the text. This first reader contained the alphabet, a set of syllables called a syllabary, the invocation, and the Lord’s Prayer (see Figure 1). In a 1691 diary entry, Samuel Sewall recorded sending his toddler off to school carrying a hornbook (Monaghan, 2005). Reading instruction could be offered to children this young because the method used was an oral, spelling approach to reading, called the “alphabet method.” In this method, which was essentially the only approach to reading instruction in use until about 1820, children first named the letters of the alphabet, spelled aloud the syllables in the syllabary (e.g., “ab,” “eb,” “ib,” “ob,” “ub,” etc.), and then spelled and recited each word of the printed prayer (see Monaghan, 2005, pp. 386-387).

The mainstay of Colonial primary education was the primer, so named because it was thought to contain the primary essentials for one’s spiritual existence. In fact, the word primer originally meant a book of prayers (Harris & Hodges, 1995). Unlike the hornbook, primers were true books as some were more than 70 pages and were comprehensive texts. The first truly American primer, printed on an American press and designed for the American market, was the *New-England Primer*, published shortly before 1690 (Monaghan & Barry, 1999). Although sizes and shapes of primers differed, they were generally very small, probably because paper, which had to be imported from England through most of the 17th century, was a valuable commodity. Indeed, the standard size of the *New England Primer* (1727) was only $2\frac{1}{2} \times 4$ inches.
Like that of the hornbook, the content of the primer was Christian in nature. Unlike the hornbook, however, the *New-England Primer* reflected the beliefs of the Puritans. These beliefs are embodied, for example, in the alphabet verses, which were the best-remembered feature of the *Primer*. The doctrine of original sin was evident in the first verse of the woodcut print: “In Adam’s Fall/We Sinned All,” and the hope of salvation provided by the Bible in the second: “Thy Life to Mend/This Book Attend.”

After this introductory alphabet, there was an extensive syllabary (i.e., a table or listing of syllables), then words of one syllable, chosen for their familiarity, e.g., “God,” “grace,” “peace.” Again, the child was directed to first orally spell, then say these words. The following pages offered words in an increasing number of syllables, up to five, such as “For-ni-ca-ti-on” and “Ex-hor-ta-ti-on.” Clearly, such words were not developmentally appropriate for young children, but children’s interests were thought to be irrelevant to the need for religious instruction, and reading was merely a vehicle for accessing the religious text. This became even more evident in the largest section of the primer, the catechism, which took the form of questions and answers (e.g., “Q: What is sin? A: Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of the law of God,” n.p.).

The primer, like the hornbook, was translated for Native Americans by Colonists, who hoped to teach their neighbors to read and, in doing so, convert
them to Christianity. The third version of the Indian primer was the first bilingual text to be printed in the Colonies. It was printed with Massachusetts and English languages side-by-side as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Title page of *The Indian Primer* or the First Book (1720)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Massachusett Indian language text</th>
<th>English language text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Indiane</td>
<td>The Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRIMER</td>
<td>PRIMER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afuh</td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEGONNEYEUUK</td>
<td>The FIRST Book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ne nafhpe Mukkiefog</td>
<td>By which Children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woh</td>
<td>may</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tauogwunnamuhkuttee</td>
<td>know truly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogketamunnate Indiane</td>
<td>to read the Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unmontoowaonk.</td>
<td>Language</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This tedious alphabet method, with its dependence on recitation and memorization, required the discipline that Puritans found important. Additionally, instruction during the Colonial period had to prepare individuals to be independent learners because of the very limited time spent in school. By the year 1800, most people attended fewer than 90 days of schooling in their entire lifetime (Cubberly, 1934).

Around the time of the American Revolution, it was no longer considered appropriate to use reading materials that had been printed in England. A young, patriotic American named Noah Webster decided the new nation should publish its own spellers, with a uniform pronunciation and spelling, designed to unite the new country (Balmuth, 1992; Monaghan, 1983). The speller of the 1700s actually was intended to teach reading, spelling, religion, and morality. Webster used his own money to pay for the publication of his nation’s new speller, and in 1783, it was the first one published on an American press. A man who truly loved words, he titled it, *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language, Comprising an Easy, Concise, and Systematic Method of Education, Designed for Use of English Schools in America. In Three Parts* (n.d.). The three parts were spelling, grammar, and essays for reading.

The First Part of Webster’s book used the alphabet method, beginning with a lengthy syllabary. It then moved to lists of words with increasing numbers of
syllables, culminating in words with eight syllables. Interspersed among the word lists were “lessons,” which contained sentences and selections with moral messages. The Third Part of Webster’s speller, the reader, was designed for children who could already read. The selections were very dry, however, and not likely to appeal to young readers. It included speeches of Roman tributes, for example, and political pieces, such as “A Declaration by the Representatives of the United Colonies of North America, Setting Forth the Causes and Necessity of Their Taking up Arms, July 6, 1775.” Samuel Pettengill, who owned the book pictured in Figure 2, apparently found Webster’s reading selections so boring that on several pages, he carefully pasted Charles Dickens’ “The Detective Story” and other short stories over the original text.

**Figure 2.** Webster, Noah. n.d. *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking...Being the Third Part of a Grammatical Institute of the English Language.* Hartford, CT. Flyleaf and preferred reading pasted over pages of reader.

Despite the dull reading selections, Webster’s book was the most popular introductory reading textbook in the United States until the 1820s, when it began to look old-fashioned. Its widespread popularity did, however, reinforce the instructional methods it contained. Webster supported his family with the income from its sales during the 30 years it took him to write his famous dictionary, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), (Monaghan & Barry, 1999).
Focus on Meaning

In the 1820s, American educators began to look at the work of European educational reformers like Rousseau and Pestalozzi, who stressed the importance of meaning for the child (Mathews, 1966; Monaghan, 2005). Horace Mann and other like-minded educators believed that American education’s chief weakness was the meaninglessness of its material. They published their views in the *American Journal of Education* and criticized the old spelling books, with their long lists of incomprehensible words and tedious essays. In response to this criticism, educators created a series of readers that graded material according to its difficulty and included information for teachers, such as prereading activities, comprehension questions, and stories that would interest children who were learning to read. The best-known series from this new type of reader was the Eclectic series of William Holmes McGuffey (first published in 1836). These new instructional methods were not McGuffey’s brainchild, however, but that of Samuel Worcester, who published them in the *Primer of the English Language* (1826), (Venezky, 1987). Indeed, McGuffey borrowed so liberally from Worcester’s innovative ideas that Worcester and his publisher sued McGuffey and his publisher for plagiarism and won an out-of-court settlement for $2,000 in 1838 (Monaghan & Barry, 1999).

The McGuffey Readers were so successful partly because they were shrewdly and aggressively marketed (Venezky, 1987) and also because the publishers knew their constituents. For example, McGuffey stories avoided any reference to slavery or to Abraham Lincoln that might offend the Southern market. Included, however, especially in the early editions, was a strong theological element. The second reader of 1837, for instance, contained the story, “How the World was Made,” which marked the date of the creation of the world at 4000 B.C. Cultural values were supported by stories like “The Good Girl,” which glorified the female roles as caregivers and dutiful mothers. Main characters or those who showed moral or physical courage were inevitably males. With sales estimated at 120 million, McGuffey readers were responsible for widely disseminating cultural and religious values through stories and comprehension questions, such as, “By whom was the earth made?” and “How long is it since the earth was made?” (McGuffey, 1837, p. 83).

By the 1830s, a group of educators began to advocate that words be presented as wholes. They argued that children learned from whole to part, not from part to whole, which was the idea with the alphabet method (Mathews, 1966; Monaghan, 2005). They began to experiment with introducing whole words with pictures and concrete experiences. Children were asked to link printed words to words already in their speaking vocabulary. Instant recognition was the goal, so children learned
words by sight. This word method is operationalized in readers like the one shown in Figure 3.

![Figure 3. Hillard, G.S. & Campbell, L.J. (1873). *The Franklin Primer or First Reader*. Boston: Brewer and Tileston. Meaning emphasis, whole-word approach.]

**Phonics**

Around the time of the Civil War, “phonie” readers began to emphasize the sounds that letters made instead of merely their names. These readers used (a) an invented or reformed alphabet, (b) diacritical markings on the traditional alphabet, and (c) synthetic phonics, an approach that converts letters into sounds and then blends the sounds.

**Invented or Reformed Alphabet**

Some individuals in the 1800s believed the only scientific way to begin reading instruction was to use an alphabet with one-to-one correspondence between sounds and letters (Harrison, 1964; Monaghan & Barry, 1999). This would avoid the confusion created by multiple spellings for one sound, such as the many possible spellings for the long “a” sound (ate, champagne, rain, arraign, gauge, ray, expose, suede, steak, matinee, eh, veil, feign, Marseilles, beret, obey). One individual
who advocated the use of a new alphabet was Isaac Pitman, an Englishman, who in 1844, devised and published the first “phonetic” alphabet, in particular to aid spelling (Harrison, 1964). About a decade later, Brigham Young hired George Watt, a phonetic expert who studied under Pitman, to create a similar alphabet with one-to-one sound-symbol correspondence. The Deseret alphabet was the result of Watt’s efforts and was the basis for the Deseret Series of Readers, which were used in the Utah Public Schools to teach beginning reading and to teach converts coming to Salt Lake City from countries around the world. As can be seen in Figure 4, this alphabet was quite different from the traditional alphabet.

Figure 4. Regents of the Deseret University. (1868). The Deseret Second Book. n.p. Phonic approach via invented alphabet.

The Deseret Series, with its extreme variance from the traditional alphabet, eventually was discontinued for several reasons. These included children’s confusion at learning two systems, lack of popular support, cost, competition from materials printed in the conventional alphabet, and the arrival of the railroad in 1869, which ended the isolation of the Mormons (Monaghan & Barry, 1999). Interestingly, however, in 1959, James Pitman modified his grandfather’s alphabet and used letters closer to traditional print to create the Augmented Roman Alphabet, later renamed the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.). Pitman intended that the i.t.a. only be used in the initial stages of teaching reading. This Initial Teaching Alphabet was brought
to the United States from England and used in U.S. schools during the 1960s and 1970s (Harrison, 1964).

**Diacritical Markings on the Traditional Alphabet**

Other educators, however, believed that instead of a reformed alphabet, text should include diacritical marks that showed how letters were to be pronounced (Monaghan & Barry, 1999). Edward G. Ward, former superintendent of schools in Brooklyn, New York, produced a popular set of readers at the end of the 1800s that made extensive use of diacritical marks. Stories such as “The Little Red Hen” and fables like “The Wind and the Sun” appeared in this reader, along with tales of speaking animals. The tale of Little Silver-Hair and the three bears is still recognizable (See Figure 5).

![Figure 5](image)

**Figure 5.** Ward, Edward G. (1896). *The Rational Method in Reading. Second Reader.* Boston: Silver Burdett & Co. Phonic approach via diacritical markings.

**Synthetic Phonics Approaches**

While diacritical markings were often used to introduce new words before a story was read, synthetic phonics approaches, in place by the end of the 1800s, did not include text with diacritical markings (Monroe, 1877; Pollard, 1889). Readers
in this category instead followed a predictable sequence: (a) Teach the letter names and their sounds, usually with pictures; (b) Sound out and blend words as soon as a few letter-sounds are learned; and (c) Orally read sentences and stories containing words with the letter sounds learned. Today these would be called decodable texts. While synthetic phonics is still widely used in the twenty-first century, analytic (whole-to-part or deductive phonics), and an analogy form using onset and rime or word families, (Adams, 1990) have replaced diacritical markings and invented alphabets. An early example of synthetic phonics can be seen in Monroe’s (1877) Chart-Primer (Figure 6).

![Figure 6](image)

*Figure 6.* Monroe, Lewis B. (1877). The Chart-Primer, or First Steps in Reading. Philadelphia: Cowperthwait & Co. Phonic approach via synthetic phonics.

**Modern Readers**

While the method of reading instruction changed after the 1820s (from the alphabet method to meaning-and phonics-based approaches), so too, did the materials change. After the Civil War, reading series appeared much as they are
today. There was generally a primer and five or six graded readers. Instructions were provided for the teacher for the first time in Worcester’s *Primer of the English Language* (1826) and prereading activities were incorporated as well (Monaghan & Barry, 1999). McGuffey’s *Second Reader* (1837) was one of the earliest to include comprehension questions (Monaghan & Barry, 1999). Ellen Cyr was the first author to produce a series with eight books and also was the first American woman with a widely sold reading series marketed under her name (Barry, 2005). Her beginning reader was published in 1886, and her series, which was translated into Spanish, Japanese, and Braille, became California’s state-adopted reading series in 1905. Cyr’s readers represented a change in both methods and in the cultural values they presented. She was ahead of her time in incorporating silent-reading comprehension activities and instruction, and her primer was significantly longer than those of her contemporaries, which allowed children far more practice reading new words in context before additional words were added (Barry, 2005). Regarding cultural shifts, Cyr’s stories also included female main characters and girls who took action, unlike other popular readers, such as McGuffey’s. By Cyr’s *Third Reader* (1902), she also provided stories by and substantial biographies of female authors, including Julia Dorr, Louisa May Alcott, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Celia Thaxter. Cyr thus showed the children who read her books that girls could grow up to be something other than caregivers; they could be writers.

**Sentence and Story Methods**

By the 1880s, educators like Colonel Francis Parker and George Farnham began to promote the importance of meaning and understanding in beginning-reading instruction. Reading was thought getting, explained Parker in his *Talks on Teaching* (1883). In response to Parker and to George Farnham’s *The Sentence Method of Reading* (1895), sentence-method and story-method readers began to appear. In the sentence method, as Parker (1883) and Farnham (1895) explained it, the teacher presented the story one sentence at a time through questioning and the use of illustrations. For the page below (Figure 7), the teacher might show the picture of the apple and ask, “What is this?” Student’s whole-sentence responses were written on the blackboard, and children read each sentence as it was presented. In a sense, the child “discovered” his/her way through the text. After constructing a story using this holistic approach, the teacher worked from the whole sentence to the part. Sentences were examined by words (apple, see, etc.), and then words were examined by letters (a, s, etc.).
In the story method, teachers began instruction by reading the complete text to the child from the reader. Children memorized the story, often a rhyme or fairy tale with repetitive refrains, before they saw it in print. This approach was seen in Charles Eliot Norton’s *The Heart of Oak Books* (1902). Norton believed that selection of content, not methodology, was the critical element in teaching beginning reading, and therefore he tried to have his books nourish “the growing intelligence of the child...with selected portions of the best literature” (Norton, 1902, p. vi). Full-color illustrations used in readers of the early 1900s also enhanced their content.

**The Influence of Scientific Investigation**

The shift toward silent reading and away from elocutionary texts began late in the 1800s and was reinforced by experimental evidence, which found that children understood text more easily when they read it silently rather than aloud (Gray, 1917). Readers such as *The Silent Readers* (Lewis & Rowland, 1920) invoked the studies of Starch (1916), Judd (1916), Courtis (1917), Monroe (1918), Kelly (1916), and many others to support the importance of silent reading.

The content of readers also shifted during the 1930s, as fairy tales began to give way to more realistic stories of children at home and play. Publishers used
the work of Thorndike (*The Teacher’s Word Book*, 1921) and Gates (*A Reading Vocabulary for the Primary Grades*, 1926) as sources for the words they included in their beginning readers. This resulted in more rigorous vocabulary control, a move which publishers referred to as “scientifically controlled vocabulary” (Mavrogenes, 1985, p. 266).

Also during the 1930s, the teaching of reading began to develop as a separate professional field. Books for teachers of reading gained in popularity, including *The Prevention and Correction of Reading Difficulties* by Emmett Betts (1936) and *Remedial Reading* by Marion Monroe and Bertie Bachus (1937). Reading research and reading pedagogy were linked by scholars such as William S. Gray, of the University of Chicago, who along with William H. Elson co-authored the Scott, Foresman series (Mavrogenes, 1985). Gray later served as senior author of Scott, Foresman’s Basic Readers from 1940 to 1948. This series, commonly known as the “Dick and Jane” series, was centered on white, suburban, middle-class families and their pets, Spot and Puff. The series came with guides for teachers, scripted lessons, supplementary materials and word lists in the back of each book. Although phonics played a role, the series took a predominantly whole-word approach to reading.

This word method was aggressively challenged in Rudolf Flesch’s (1955) book, *Why Johnny Can’t Read and What You Can Do About It*. Flesch’s solution: teach phonics! From Flesch’s (1955) perspective, “The teaching of reading—all over the United States, in all the schools, in all the textbooks—is totally wrong and flies in the face of all logic and common sense” (p. 2). Flesch described the word method as one in which words were learned via “endless repetition” and he characterized the series about Dick and Jane as “horrible, stupid, emasculated, pointless, tasteless little readers” (pp. 6-7). With language such as this, it is no wonder that a reading “war” erupted. This acrimony, which involved not only pedagogical differences but also the expensive reading programs that aligned with those differences, continues to today.

Despite Flesch’s (1955) admonition to teach phonics, “most schoolchildren in the United States [were still] taught to read by...a meaning-emphasis method” during the next decade (Chall, 1967, p. 256). In order to resolve the debate about learning to read, Jeanne Chall, a respected Harvard researcher, conducted a systematic analysis of reading research and programs. She concluded that a code-emphasis method produced better readers “not only in terms of the mechanical aspects of literacy...but also in terms of the ultimate goals of reading instruction—comprehension and possibly even speed of reading” (Chall, 1967, p. 307). In addition, however, she also concluded that language, good teaching, and appropriately-leveled
instructional materials were important factors in developing successful readers. The stirrings of “balance” were evident.

While the methodology debate stole center stage, a truly significant change occurred more quietly in 1965: A minority family finally appeared in a basal reading program. Soon after the first African-American family moved into a Scott, Foresman neighborhood, Ginn, the second most widely sold basal reading series followed suit, and African-American children began to appear on their playgrounds in 1966 (Barry, 2007). These two publishers, Ginn and Scott, Foresman, accounted for about 80 percent of total reading-series sales so the effect was pervasive (Chall, 1967). A focus on difference in skin color represented one of the shifts in values across a century of reading textbooks. According to Andrews’ (1995) analysis of the top seven basals in use in US public schools from 1895-1995, the average reader of 100 years ago emphasized “virtue, honesty, obedience, and purity” (p. 2). By the mid-nineties, those values shifted to “good self-concept, appreciation of difference and regard for nature” (Andrews, 1995, p. 2). Andrews (1995) also identified a quantitative shift in values as she noted that “some value was taught in approximately 65% of the selections” during the latter 1800s whereas the average number of selections containing values in 1995 was 35% (p. 2).

Basals continued as a primary component of classroom reading instruction and the 1970s actually saw an “overemphasis on drill and workbooks” (Ravitch, 2000, p.444). Therefore, enthusiasm for a meaning-centered approach, using children’s literature, authentic texts, and teacher empowerment was an understandable reaction, especially for those committed to progressive educational ideas. This other view of reading came to be known as whole language.

Whole Language

Yetta Goodman (1989) placed early use of the term whole language in a description of paradigms by Harste and Burke (1977), where, Goodman explained, one of the paradigms was called a “whole-language view of reading” (p. 115). Goodman watched as the grass-roots appeal of this paradigm spread and Missouri teachers formed the first support group in 1978 under the name Teachers Applying Whole Language. Yetta and her husband, Ken Goodman, further developed the concept in a 1979 paper titled, “A Whole Language Comprehension-Centered Reading Curriculum.” In What’s Whole in Whole Language, Ken Goodman (1986) explained how this approach differed from others. He believed that phonics and word advocates missed how readers construct meaning from language. Both methods treat all words as equally important, and both limit the learners to cues within
words rather than to cues in their transactions with connected discourse—the whole flow of language. The debate had shifted from phonics versus whole-word to phonics versus whole language.

An international teacher-support group for whole language sprang up in Canada and began presenting whole-language workshops in 1980. Professional organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association also contained many vocal advocates. “For a time,” reflects Ravitch (2000), “it seemed that whole language would sweep the reading field and reduce the opposition to a footnote in the history of education” (p. 446).

One of the problems the whole language movement constantly faced, however, was a lack of consensus as to its definition and even whether it was an approach, method, model, theory, philosophy, or movement. To solve the problem, Bergeron (1990) analyzed the existing literature pertaining to whole language to compile a definition. She concluded “no such definition was found to exist” (p. 318) and therefore constructed one:

Whole language is a concept that embodies both a philosophy of language development as well as the instructional approaches embedded within, and supportive of, that philosophy. This concept includes the use of real literature and writing in the context of meaningful, functional, and cooperative experiences in order to develop a student’s motivation and interest in the process of learning. (p. 319)

Whole language became politicized in 1988 when California State Superintendent Honig outlined a new initiative to guide reading instruction in California, the largest school system in the US. This revolutionary English-Language Arts Framework (1987) called for a shift in emphasis from skills-based reading programs to programs in which quality literature was the keystone. According to Ravitch (2000), “Honig did not realize that the state’s document was widely perceived as a great victory for whole language” (p. 446). The victory ended when California’s students scored near the bottom among 50 states on both the 1992 and 1994 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessments (Freeman, Freeman, & Fennacy, 1997). While causes for the decline were complex (minimal inservice, a lack of resources, confusion over concepts, a spike in the number of Limited English Proficient students, increased poverty) the nation perceived the decline as a direct result of whole language. California schools returned to a program of intensive, systematic phonics (Reading Task Force, 1995).

As questions and debate continued over the best method for beginning reading instruction, in 1997 the US Congress stepped in and asked the Director
of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), and the Secretary of Education to appoint a panel of experts to determine the effectiveness of various approaches to reading (National Institute of Child Health and Development, 2000). The panel of 14 who were chosen sorted through 100,000 reading research studies to analyze those containing large sample sizes that were experimental in design and showed causality between practice and outcomes. Based on these studies, the Report of the National Reading Panel: Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-Based Assessment of the Scientific Research Literature on Reading and Its Implications for Reading Instruction (NICHD, 2000) was produced. It concluded that effective reading programs should include instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and text comprehension. At about this same time, the National Research Council also convened a distinguished group of researchers, chaired by Catherine Snow of Harvard (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). The panel concluded that beginning readers need “explicit instruction and practice that lead to an appreciation that spoken words are made up of smaller units of sounds...‘sight’ recognition of frequent words, and independent reading, including reading aloud” (Snow et al., 1998, p.7); in other words, a balanced approach to reading. As a matter of fact, this group saw their purpose as providing an “integrated picture of how reading develops” (Snow et al., 1998, p. 2), with the hope that their report “may indeed mark the end of the reading wars” (Snow et al., 1998, p.vii).

Summary

The purpose of this article was to address both national and state requirements that educators know the historical antecedents of reading methods and materials, and the values they conveyed. Understanding this history allows one to see how the field arrived at its current position, advocating for a balanced approach to literacy. Additionally, historical knowledge allows reading educators to view the progress made in literacy instruction over time.

Moore, Monaghan, & Hartman (1997) put forth “values of literacy history” in which they state, “a common rationale for history is that people can learn from the past. This rationale has always appealed to me; it implies that history can speak to practical matters” (p. 90). A very practical matter addressed here is effectiveness: what worked and what did not work in teaching children to read. For example, the alphabet method, a rote, oral, spelling approach to reading, used during the Colonial period, was discontinued. This change occurred during the 1800s because
of a shift in society’s attitude toward childhood and because educators concluded that rote memorization without meaning was not effective.

Progress continued during the latter 1800s and 1900s via word, sentence, and story methods of reading instruction. Variations of these concepts moved in and out of popularity, coalescing during the 1970s into a more comprehensive concept known as whole language. This philosophy and approach was designed to allow readers to make use of their transactions with connected discourse.

Other attempts at improving reading instruction came in the form of phonic approaches—invented, diacritical markings and synthetic. These phonic variations were originally implemented in the mid 1800s in order to be more scientific about reading instruction, to bring logic to our confusing English orthography, and to provide children with a tool for self-help. Invented or nontraditional phonics approaches did not work due to cost, lack of support, and the confusion involved in learning two systems. These were therefore discontinued. Synthetic phonics and later analytic and analogic variations, have continued for well over a century. Also maintained since the 1800s was the debate over best practice: phonics versus whole word and then phonics versus whole language. Again, it seems to have taken too long to get to the logical conclusion to integrate multiple approaches, using what works at each stage of development.

The content of reading materials changed significantly from the colonial era as ideas of developmental appropriateness replaced the drive to save a child’s blemished soul. Texts shifted the values they conveyed from religious to secular and stories became more inclusive of both race and gender. High-quality illustrations and the use of color were incorporated to enhance interest and understanding. Including comprehension as a skill to be taught and learned was a novel idea for the readers of Worcester (1826) and McGuffey (1837).

Scientific investigations in the early 1900s caused a change from oral to silent reading. Choosing oral or silent approaches, phonics or whole words, is thankfully, now the purview of the teacher. The teacher as professional and the rise of reading as a separate professional field is another example of progress made. Of course, part of professionalized development is knowing the history of one’s field. Due to this professionalization we acknowledge that it is the teacher, and not the material, that is the key to quality instruction. Therefore, a plethora of research-based resources currently exist to help educators decide what works for each child. Deciding how to balance instruction is, indeed, complex.

Effective balanced instruction requires a very comprehensive, integrated approach, demanding that teachers know a great deal about literacy
research related to emergent literacy, assessment-based instruction, phonological and phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, phonics and word study, selecting appropriate leveled readers, reader response, writing process, and constructivist learning. (Cowen, 2003, p. 2)

If we are in a position not to repeat the mistakes from our past, we have the opportunity to put our energies into tackling problems not yet solved.

References


---

**Children’s Readers Cited**


---

**About the Author:**

**Arlene L. Barry**, Ph.D. is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, KS. Her research interests include the history of literacy, adolescent literacy, and assessment. Dr. Barry earned her doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Prior to university work, her classroom experiences included teaching grades K-9, in both regular and special education. She has been a member and officer in IRA’s History of Reading Special Interest Group.