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Marie Carducci-Bolchazy
State University of New York at Albany

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A SURVEY OF READING READINESS PRACTICE

Marie Carducci-Bolchazy

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT ALBANY

Practices in reading readiness programs vary considerably (Spache & Spache, 1973). In some programs the emphasis is upon language development; in other programs the emphasis is upon perceptual and/or perceptual-motor training. In fact, in some programs (e.g., Kephart, 1960; Frostig, 1961), little or no attention is given to language development, and even in programs that have a language-development component, some emphasis on perceptual and/or perceptual-motor training is common.

Perceptual and/or Perceptual-Motor Training

There is some theoretical support for the use of perceptual and/or perceptual-motor programs. The use of these programs stems primarily from G. Stanley Hall's (1904) recapitulation theory, the theory that an individual in his own development passes through stages similar to those the race passed through in the same order. In the 1920's lack of readiness was the accepted explanation for the lack of success of many first-graders to learn to read. Expressed in Hall's terminology, a child who lacked readiness for initial reading instruction had not yet reached the stage of development which would allow that child to be successful (Durkin, 1970).

One implication of Hall's theory is that children would have to develop perceptual-motor abilities before they developed reading ability. The attempt to apply Hall's theory to educational practice was probably the major reason for the development of perceptual-motor training programs to serve as reading readiness programs.

Robinson (1972) and Grise (1973) have reviewed the literature of the results of perceptual-motor programs on reading improvement. Both commented on the contradictory findings of the research. Grise was concerned with the poor quality of the research designs, especially of those studies that found perceptual-motor programs to be of benefit to reading improvement. Additionally, Robinson (1972) and Klesius (1972) were concerned with the unproved nature of the tests of perception.

The research on one perceptual-training program, the Frostig program, is fairly conclusive. Spache and Spache (1973) listed seven studies that found the effect of the Frostig training on reading to be insignificant. They listed only one that found the effects of the Frostig training on reading to be significant. Furthermore, one of the studies had significant findings in favor of the control group. Robinson (1972) stated that:

The Frostig program of visual-perceptual training is not effective in improving reading regardless of the school level at which it is in-

troduced, the number of periods of instruction, the socioeconomic level of the pupils, or the scores the pupils make on initial visual-perception tests. (p. 139)

Despite the lack of evidence to support perceptual, or perceptual-motor training programs for developing reading readiness or for developing reading skills, these programs have the endorsement of many authorities in the field of reading. For example, Spache and Spache (1973), whose text is used currently in many college-level reading education courses, firmly believe in the effectiveness of reading readiness programs weighted in favor of non-language components. Their recommended reading readiness program includes training in: body image, laterality and directionality, hand-eye coordination, form perception, and auditory memory in addition to the language-based activities.

Language-based Reading Readiness Programs

In the past decade psycholinguists have been investigating the similarities between the processing of speech and the processing of reading and are convinced that speech and reading are closely related. There have been a number of investigations which support the theory that speech and reading are processed in similar ways. Some researchers have investigated the relationship between complexity of oral language use and reading success. At the first- and second-grade levels, Strickland (reported in Chall, 1967) and Martin (reported in Lavatelli, 1971) found no significant relationship between complexity of oral language and reading success; however, at the sixth-grade level, there was a significant relationship (Strickland, reported in Chall, 1967). Similarly Loban (reported in Lavatelli, 1971), in his six-year longitudinal study, found no significant relationship at grades one and two but an increasingly significant relationship in the next four grades. These findings underscore the importance of early development of oral language skills, as they suggest that advanced language skills are the foundation for an ever-increasing rate of reading achievement.

Some studies on differences in dialects also confirm the relationship between speech and reading. Labov (1966) found that differences due to dialect (e.g., the dropping of the “-ed” in Black English) may cause difficulty in reading comprehension. In one investigation, he had his sample of Negro children read aloud the sentence, “I looked for him when I read his name.” The majority of the children in his sample failed to recognize that the “-ed” in the word “looked” signaled that the word “read” was in the past tense. This finding suggests that speech patterns can affect reading comprehension.

Some evidence, quite different from the research considered so far, provides support for the concept of a language-based reading readiness program. This evidence suggests that the developmental sequence in syntactical control continues well past the kindergarten year. Menyuk (1963) has identified some components of syntactic structure that are in the

“so” clauses, perfects, and nominalizations. Loban (reported in Ruddell, 1973), in his longitudinal study, found that the average communication unit length increased throughout the elementary grades. Harrell (reported in Ruddell, 1973) compared selected variables in the speech and writing of children from ages nine to fifteen. The following variables increased with age: length of composition and clauses, the percentage of subordinate clauses used, and the number of adverb and adjective clauses used. These data give evidence that children do continue to develop their language skills throughout the elementary and even secondary school years. These data also suggest (considering the close relationship between the processing of spoken and the processing of written language) that attention should be given to oral language development in reading or reading readiness programs.

Survey of Current Reading Readiness Practices

In March and April of 1975, a survey of current reading readiness practices was conducted. This investigator had designed a survey form covering questions on reading readiness tests and reading readiness programs. In formulating the questions on the readiness programs, the activities recommended by Spache and Spache (1973) were used. The survey form was revised incorporating the suggestions of a number of reviewers. The revised survey form was sent to a stratified random sample of fifteen school districts from ten counties in New York State. The sample included districts of varying socioeconomic levels from rural, suburban, and urban areas. Respondents were reading coordinators, reading directors, reading teachers, and, in one case, a building principal. In all cases the respondent was the person assumed to have the greatest familiarity with the over-all reading program at the primary level. There was a 100% return of the survey forms.

All of the school districts reported regular or extensive use of language-based activities in their readiness programs, e.g., word and letter discrimination. However, activities that are not language-based also were used extensively or regularly. Two-thirds or more of the districts in the survey reported extensive or regular use of the following non-language-based activities specifically for the purpose of developing reading readiness: (1) auditory awareness (identifying sounds of musical instruments, animals; (2) identifying by feel, taste, smell; (3) body image (movement games, skipping rope); (4) hand-eye coordination (cutting, pasting, marbles); (5) small muscle coordination (bead stringing, tracing, dot pictures, pick-up sticks); (6) large muscle coordination (bean bags, dart games, ball throwing); (7) three dimensional form perception (puzzles, clay, pegboards); (8) two dimensional form perception (tracing, drawing, reproducing or matching forms). These findings applied to urban, suburban, and rural districts across socioeconomic level. These activities apparently have wide-spread support from teachers as reading readiness training. If these activities do not serve to develop reading readiness, then much effort is being misdirected.

In view of the wide-spread support of perceptual and perceptual-motor activities, continued efforts should be directed towards researching their effectiveness for developing reading readiness. However, priority for research in reading readiness should be placed on developing language-based reading readiness models. As previously discussed, the relationship between speech and reading is considerable. Psycholinguists theorize that both speech and reading should be viewed in the context of information processing (Smith, 1971; Kolers, 1970; Levin & Kaplan, 1970). Some researchers even suggest that speech and reading are processed in the same way (Smith, 1971), although others caution against considering the two processes to be identical (Gibson, 1972; Fleming, 1970; Conrad, 1972; and Mattingly, 1972).

Based on research done to date, it cannot be concluded that the use of non-language-based activities for developing reading readiness should be eliminated. However, in regard to developing reading readiness, the close relationship between speech and reading suggests that the use of language-based programs is more promising than the use of non-language-based programs.

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