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Paul Wilson

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READING: THE CONFERENCES

Paul Wilson

<p>National Reading Conference Annual Meeting — San Antonio Texas December 2-5, 1992</p>

During its more than 40 year existence, the National Reading Conference has become one of our première avenues for stimulating and reporting on advances in reading research, reading instruction, and reading policy. The 1992 annual meeting, with 142 sessions, is the most recent contribution to NRC's fine reputation. The following highlights are presented with apologies to the many fine researchers, scholars and teachers whose work cannot be mentioned.

There were two interesting symposia on Reading Recovery. Billie J. Askew and her collaborators from Texas Women's University documented sustained effects of Reading Recovery instruction into second grade, effectiveness of text introductions on oral readings, and use of Reading Recovery procedures in Spanish. The other, with Carol Lyons, Gay Su Pinnell, and Diane DeFord, all of The Ohio State University, contributed to the increasingly detailed investigations of how and why Reading Recovery instruction works so effectively with high risk students.

Dale M. Willows, of The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, was an effective discussant in a symposium on spelling development organized by her colleague Esther Geva. Dr. Willows pointed out methodological difficulties in

using word recognition as a measure to assess letter and sound knowledge, and in relying only on spelling in isolation vs. in spontaneous writing.

Darrell Morris and his colleagues from Appalachian State University presented some very effective, carefully worked out research in the area of spelling. Their most important finding involved third grade "poor" spellers: When these children received a second year of instruction using the second grade spelling materials, not only did they improve significantly on their second grade spelling, but they also made greater gains on the third grade words (that they had never studied) than did a control group of third grade poor spellers who received instruction with the third grade materials. Among the many sessions I attended, this one had the most direct positive implications for instruction.

Peter Dewitz, University of Toledo, compared the recently advocated analogy approach to a traditional phonics approach to word recognition instruction. First graders do not gain any extra benefit from analogy instruction because they lack the base of phonetic knowledge that analogy instruction depends on; however, second and third graders who scored lower in phonemic awareness did gain some benefits from an analogy approach.

Both the speakers and the discussant achieved a heightened level of discourse in a symposium addressing historical perspectives on text commentaries and how they relate to comprehension and the audience. Ann J. Pace, University of Missouri-Kansas City, reviewed the Jewish tradition of text study and commentary. Anthony V. Manzo, University of Missouri-Kansas City, described the dialectical process and its role in generating new knowledge. Rosalind Horowitz, from the host city's University of Texas-San Antonio, examined how the structure of classroom

discourse might be explored in relation to the structure of written text. In a penetrating and scholarly discussion, Richard L. Venezky, University of Delaware, surveyed different modes of commentary and audience participation ranging from the mediated interpretation of the Catholic tradition to the very recent Hypertext books that allow for a variety of paths through the text, along with audience participation in creating different variants of the text on every machine where the text resides.

As in previous years, there was a Town Meeting for discussions related to the goals, organization, needs, and future directions of the National Reading Conference. The meeting was facilitated, not moderated, by Jerry Harste, Indiana University, and Rosary Lalik, Virginia Polytechnic Institute. The chief topic of discussion focused on whether the NRC annual meeting should continue to be scheduled the week after Thanksgiving. Anyone with continuing thoughts on this issue might write to the NRC Board of Directors at 11 E. Hubbard St., Chicago, IL 60611.

Another event that is becoming an annual tradition is The Lighter Side of NRC. James Hoffman and several University of Texas-Austin collaborators dramatized an odd variation of *Miss Nelson Is Missing*. John Konopak, Louisiana State University and his "band" performed the Content Reading Blues. Lee Gunderson of the University of British Columbia ran an auction of personalized t-shirts (with photographs of present day NRC luminaries) that were bid on primarily by graduate students; the bidding war was particularly intense between the graduate students from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland.

Ofelia Miramontes, University of Colorado at Boulder, delivered a plenary address on how schooling affects

linguistically diverse students. She emphasized the need for strong oral language development, discussed 10 principles for more effective instruction, and cautioned that assessment of ESL children in both the first and second languages is instructionally dependent: A child may be orally fluent in the home language, yet not able to perform on school tasks in that language because of a lack of school-related instruction.

Two plenary addresses focussed on the quantitative vs. qualitative paradigm debate currently raging in educational research. Donna Alvermann, University of Georgia, in her Presidential Address, "Researching The Literal: Of Muted Voices, Second Texts, and Cultural Representations," expressed concerns about how the background experiences of researchers not only predisposed them to ask certain questions but also how those same experiences could constrain the researcher's ability to discern the truth of a situation. She urged researchers to make clear their own biases so that their readers could be more clear on the limitations of their work.

The Research Address by Peter Johnston, SUNY at Albany, was on the language of assessment and the assessment of language. Johnston related the two sides of the quantitative-qualitative debate to the objective-subjective, reality-relativity and male-female dichotomies. Considerable heat was generated not only in the discussion directly following the talk, but also out in the halls of the conference hotel and the streets and restaurants of San Antonio: Are there any questions of serious worth that can be addressed through quantitative methods. Come to the Omni Hotel in Charleston, South Carolina, December 1-4, 1993, to find out if this debate has been in any way resolved.