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## READABILITY AND PARENT COMMUNICATIONS: CAN PARENTS UNDERSTAND WHAT SCHOOLS WRITE TO THEM? (Part II)

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In Part I of her article (Summer issue), Dr. Mavrogenes covered "The Rationale and Purpose of the Study," "The Procedure," and "Results: Readability of Materials".

### Parents' Education

There are still other factors involved in readability. Of particular importance are the interests and motivation of readers and their facility with language (Gilliland, 1972). One way to gauge such factors is to look at the parents' levels of education. Accordingly, the head teachers were asked to provide the highest levels of schooling by their students' parents. Three of the six head teachers supplied such lists for eight classes, one of which was bilingual. The number of parents for whom the educational level was supplied was 49 for the bilingual class and 160 for the other seven classes, making a total of 209.

TABLE 2 - EDUCATIONAL LEVELS OF PARENTS

| <u>Level of Schooling</u>   | <u>Non-Bilingual<br/>Percentage</u> | <u>Bilingual<br/>Percentage</u> |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| No schooling                | 0                                   | 10                              |
| Some elementary school      | 1                                   | 69                              |
| Completed elementary school | 3                                   | 8                               |
| Some high school            | 38                                  | 4                               |
| Graduated high school       | 38                                  | 6                               |

|                   |    |   |
|-------------------|----|---|
| Some college      | 16 | 0 |
| Graduated college | 4  | 2 |

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Since these figures are based on information supplied by the parents at the time they first enrolled their children in the CPCs at the age of three, they are not, according to the head teachers, absolutely valid figures. The fact that 58 percent of the non-bilingual parents said they were high school graduates or better was particularly suspicious. Therefore, other figures were sought to support or refute these figures. The vast majority of these parents are on welfare. According to the head teachers, the percentage of parents receiving public aid is from 90 to 98 percent, except for one of the schools which is an academy and thus receives its students from a wider area. The percentage of parents on welfare at this school was estimated at 80. The mean percentage of parents on welfare, according to head teachers' estimates, is 91. Therefore, figures were found for the educational levels of adults receiving assistance from the state Department of Public Aid or Aid to Families with Dependent Children (1986). Table 3 presents these figures for the county in which these schools are situated. It should be noted that these public aid figures are for adults, 21 or over, and that many parents are younger than 21. For them, the figures are most likely too high.

The case of the bilingual parents is somewhat different. There is not so much reason to suspect these figures. According to the head teacher at the bilingual school, the answers these parents gave to the question about their education are valid for two reasons. First, the bilingual class has a full-time bilingual teacher as well as the regular classroom teacher. That teacher knows the parents well and has established a bond of trust with them. In addition, cultural differences might also explain the validity of these figures. In Mexico education is not as widespread nor are educational expectations as high as in the United States. It might be less of a disgrace to admit to very little or no education. According to the answers of these parents, only 20 per cent have completed elementary school, with 79 percent reporting no schooling or only some ele-

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mentary school.

TABLE 3  
EDUCATIONAL LEVELS OF ADULTS ON PUBLIC AID

| <u>Level of Schooling</u>   | <u>Percentage</u> |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| No schooling                | 1                 |
| Some elementary school      | 4                 |
| Completed elementary school | 6                 |
| Some high school            | 55                |
| Graduated high school       | 25                |
| Some college                | 7                 |
| Graduated college           | 0.4               |

N = 152,219

### Conclusions

An examination of the readability levels of the communications sent out in English by these six schools to kindergarten parents reveals that almost one-half of them (45 percent) are written at a 10th grade or higher level of difficulty (Table 1). In contrast, more than one-half of the English speaking parents (at least 66 percent) have completed only some high school or less (Table 3). A person's reading level, however, does not necessarily correspond to years in school completed. For the past several decades, figures on illiteracy have received wide publicity. These figures range from 20 million American adults being completely illiterate ("Change in America", Terry, 1986) to almost half the population being functionally illiterate (unable to fill out a check, write a letter, or read a want ad) (Chall, 1984). Although there is disagreement about exact numbers, "most surveys and interpretations of the past decade . . . did agree that the status of adult literacy was far from adequate, particularly in terms of the growing technical nature of available jobs and the governing complexity of knowledge (Chall, 1984, p. 17).

As for Americans in their early 20s, the National Assessment of Educational Progress found in 1985 that 6 percent could not read as well as the average 4th grader

and 20 per cent could not read as well as an 8th grader ("20% of Young Americans," 1986). Even those who question inflated figures agree that "a substantial number of people are graduating from high school without adequate literacy skills" (Casse, 1986, p. 30). Furthermore, many adults who read below the 9th grade level (the average adult reading level) fall in the lower end of the economic scale and are members of minority communities (Roit and Pfohl, 1984; "20% of Young Americans," 1986).

Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that a significant number of parents in these school programs for educationally disadvantaged children are unable to read the communications sent to them by the schools. Their facility with language, judged by estimates of literacy, is probably low. In many cases these parents, often children themselves and a good percentage of them high school drop-outs, probably do not have the interest and motivation to figure out the letters they receive from their children's schools. It would seem imperative that the schools, which have already done so much in their attempts to reach the parents, should work harder to make the letters and newsletters they send home with their pupils easier to read. The bilingual parents, especially, are probably having trouble reading the schools' letters. Although 79 per cent of these parents have no or only some elementary schooling, the four letters written to them were at an 8th grade readability level.

Effort has already been expended to make these communications appealing and understandable. They are attractively decorated with art work and pithy sayings such as "Think togetherness" or "Our children are the only earthly possessions we can take with us to heaven." Much of the style and size of print is of the most legible type. The colors of print and paper are satisfactory. The tone of the writing is enthusiastic and persuasive. Headings are often used to organize the messages and alert the reader to the content. Sometimes unfamiliar terms and concepts are defined. At the same time, there is much room for improvement. Some difficult vocabulary is not defined. Some print is not as legible as it could be. Some pages are unattractive because no concern has been shown for the placement of the print on them. Some

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pages are hard to fathom because the grammar, punctuation, spacing, and spelling are not carefully considered. Some sentences are long and complex, with formidable vocabulary, subordinate clauses, strings of prepositional and adverbial phrases, hardly designed to be friendly to the reader.

### Recommendations

In order to improve and strengthen the appearance and content of the communications that schools send home to parents, the following recommendations are submitted. All of them are based on a consideration of the needs of the readers and aim to match the readability of the materials with the educational/literacy levels of the parents.

--Complex sentences should be simplified. When this is done, extreme care must be taken to preserve the logic of the ideas by utilizing relationship words such as because, therefore, then in order to make connections explicit (Davison and Kantor, 1982; Rush, 1985). In the following examples sentences are shorter and vocabulary is simpler, but the original ideas and relationships have been kept.

Original sentence: This is to inform you that as a consequence of your non-participation your children will be dropped from the program effective January 31, 1986.

Improvement: You have not been coming to the CPC often enough this year. Therefore, your child can no longer be a part of this program. On January 31, 1986, he will have to attend \_\_\_\_\_ School.

Original sentence: It is imperative that children be in school every day if they are to receive optimum benefits from the instructional program.

Improvement: Children must be in school every day so that they can learn as much as possible.

--Difficult and unfamiliar terms such as abstract or technical words need to be defined if they are crucial to the content. In the preceding examples the words consequence, non-participation, effective, imperative, optimum benefits, and instructional have been replaced with simpler

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structures. If a specialized term such as metabolism must be used, it should be appropriately and simply defined: how the body uses food.

- More attention should be paid to the mechanics of spelling, punctuation, grammar and typing. Careful proof reading should catch these errors. Schools are expected to and must set an example in the materials they send to their constituents.
- The placement of material on the page should be attended to. All four margins should be wide enough so that each page looks as attractive as possible.
- Headings or headlines should announce to the readers the main idea of the message or the paragraph.
- Mimeographed letters should be dark enough that they are legible. If notices are handwritten, they should be very carefully and neatly done.
- All print should be standard pica or elite type. Text written all in capital letters or in italic type should be avoided as not providing the greatest ease in reading.

Bilingual schools should be particularly careful to avoid writing which will not be comprehensible to the parents, most of whom have very little schooling.

Many of these suggestions are not hard to put into practice. All they require are a new point of view (a consideration of the reader) and more care taken with the elements of readability. Such care would be one more step in improving the schools' efforts to involve parents in their children's education. The necessity of this kind of concern was pointed out by the study examining the readability of brochures informing parents of their rights in connection with special education for their children. If the comprehensibility of materials is inappropriate, "rather than inform, they may create confusion and even discourage parent participation" (Roit and Pfohl, 1984, pp. 496-497). Such confusion and discouragement are surely not the goals nor the desire of programs for educationally disadvantaged children which seek to involve parents in their children's education.

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