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Readability and Parent Communications: Can Parents Understand What Schools Write to Them?

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Abstract

In the past two decades, much has changed in education. The civil rights movement in the 1960s focused attention on the unequal schooling of minorities and the poor preparation of those groups for school. At the same time Jerome Bruner and Benjamin Bloom were claiming that children can learn any subject at any age and that they attain half their intellectual ability by the age of 4, thus emphasizing the importance of early childhood education (Elkind, 1986). In the later 60s and early 70s, when it was becoming clear that new early childhood programs were not enough alone to meet the need, attention turned to the family milieu. New research showed that a child's achievement correlated strongly with parent interest in that child—with factors such as quality of maternal language, amount of reading and conversation, and appropriate play materials. When the federal government mandated guidelines for parent involvement in such preschool programs as Head Start, public school districts also began to add a parent component to their early childhood programs (Honig, 1982). This rationale has been validated not only by national research (Honig, 1982; Rich, 1985; Stallings and Stipek, 1986) but also by research conducted by the Department of Research and Evaluation of the Chicago Public Schools (Chicago Public Schools, 1985, 1986). In this latter case, children whose parents come to their schools and participate in school projects and who, especially, choose to work in their children's classrooms have shown significantly higher gain scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills than children whose parents were not so involved. These differences in gain scores were as much as 3-4 months and appeared in linguistic areas such as vocabulary and language (1985) and word analysis (1986).



READABILITY AND PARENT COMMUNICATIONS: CAN PARENTS UNDERSTAND WHAT SCHOOLS WRITE TO THEM?

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Rationale and Purpose of the Study

In the past two decades, much has changed in education. The civil rights movement in the 1960s focused attention on the unequal schooling of minorities and the poor preparation of those groups for school. At the same time Jerome Bruner and Benjamin Bloom were claiming that children can learn any subject at any age and that they attain half their intellectual ability by the age of 4, thus emphasizing the importance of early childhood education (Elkind, 1986). In the later 60s and early 70s, when it was becoming clear that new early childhood programs were not enough alone to meet the need, attention turned to the family milieu. New research showed that a child's achievement correlated strongly with parent interest in that child--with factors such as quality of maternal language, amount of reading and conversation, and appropriate play materials. When the federal government mandated guidelines for parent involvement in such preschool programs as Head Start, public school districts also began to add a parent component to their early childhood programs (Honig, 1982). This rationale has been validated not only by national research (Honig, 1982; Rich, 1985; Stallings and Stipek, 1986) but also by research conducted by the Department of Research and Evaluation of the Chicago Public Schools (Chicago Public Schools, 1985, 1986). In this latter case, children whose parents come to their schools and participate in school projects and who, especially, choose to work in their children's classrooms have shown significantly higher gain scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills than children whose parents were not

so involved. These differences in gain scores were as much as 3-4 months and appeared in linguistic areas such as vocabulary and language (1985) and word analysis (1986).

Therefore, in order to attract parents of educationally disadvantaged children to the schools, some all-day kindergartens and child-parent centers (CPCs) in one large Midwestern city have utilized a wide variety of appealing, interesting, and worth-while activities. Parents are invited to get-acquainted and school advisory meetings. They are asked to school assemblies such as gym shows, award celebrations, and African dances. They are urged to participate in fund-raising activities like Jump-Rope-for-Heart and a merchandise sale to benefit the School Children's Aid Society. They are encouraged to help their children's attendance, homework, and cleanliness and to strengthen their children's language skills by talking to them, reading to them, and making sure they bring things to school for Show and Tell.

Workshops are held for parents on a wide range of topics: sewing, hair care, crafts, physical fitness, domestic violence, nutrition and cooking, drug abuse, helping their children succeed, understanding their families. GED and city college classes are also organized for them to improve their own education.

Trips are planned for them--to museums, a bakery, a movie, a farm to pick vegetables, and they are asked to accompany their children on field trips. They are informed of CPC participation requirements--one-half or one day a week-- and warned that if they don't participate, their children will not be allowed to come to class, or they won't receive any kindergarten graduation tickets, or federal support for the program will be cut off. Special events are planned for them and their children: fashion shows, breakfast with Santa, puppet shows, a citywide Parent Action Fair, bake sales, book and art fairs, buffets and dinners. Many of the activities involve refreshments and door prizes.

Some of the all-day kindergartens have worked up special reading projects. One was a walking trip to the neighborhood library so that parents could get a library card in order to bring books home to read to their children. Another was a paperback lending library at school for children to borrow books and read with their families. A third library program had children's books for parents to check

out; when worksheets for 25 books were filled out by the parents and children, the children earned awards at graduation. In a parent/child literature program, small groups of parents met three times with a teacher in order to be introduced to an award-winning children's book, review the book, and make a project for the book. If parents attended all three sessions, they were given a copy of the book to take home. Such activities are designed to bolster the language development of these educationally disadvantaged children, who consistently score lowest on the Iowa Tests in vocabulary and language (Chicago Public Schools, 1984, 1985, 1986).

These schools are to be congratulated for their varied efforts at attracting parents to participate in their own and their children's education. In order to inform parents of activities especially designed for them, the schools must regularly send out to them numerous written communications. These can be newsletters, letters, notices, calendars, or special reports, sent out by principals, head teachers, classroom teachers, parent-resource teachers, school-community representatives, librarians, or an outside organization such as the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program of the local university. If parents are to effectively respond to these communications, they must be able to read them.

Studies of other kinds of public communications have been made: the Internal Revenue Service's Form 1040 (Pyrzczak, 1976), materials distributed by the Illinois Department of Public Aid (Mavrogenes, Hanson, and Winkley, 1977), automobile insurance policies (Kincaid & Gamble, 1977), newspapers' classified advertisements (Pyrzczak, 1978), and parent materials connected with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Roit and Pfohl, 1984). These studies have pointed to a mismatch between the written material and its readers. That is, the written material was too difficult for the reading ability of the people who would be reading it. Therefore, in an attempt to further improve the communication efforts of schools with parents, the present study looks at examples of materials which six of these schools have sent to parents and analyzes them in terms of their level of difficulty for their recipients. The aim, as in the case of the other studies of public communications, is to "evaluate the appropriateness of material in

relation to the educational and literacy levels of the intended audience" (Roit and Pfohl, 1984, p. 498).

Procedure

The schools involved in this project were six all-day kindergartens for educationally disadvantaged children which are also part of child-parent centers. All the children in these classes are members of minority groups. Each head teacher was asked to submit ten typical communications with parents, written by anyone in authority at that school. Each piece was to consist of running text; that is, calendars, forms, or lists would not be appropriate. The six schools submitted a total of 71 appropriate communications. Many were one-page letters or notices, but some were newsletters of 6-7 pages. Four letters for bilingual parents were written in Spanish. The head teachers were also asked to make up lists of parents with their highest levels of education. This information is supposed to be available on the student intake assessments, compiled when students enter the CPCs at the age of three. This task turned out to be more difficult for the head teachers: only three submitted such lists, the others saying that they didn't have such information or that it would not be valid information.

In order to assess the readability of these communications, Fry's "Graph for Estimating Readability--Extended" was used (Fry, 1977). In this procedure syllables and sentences are counted and then entered on a graph in order to find the text's estimated readability level, which rises as the sentences and words become longer. This graph is recommended as a way of saving time and effort when no computer is available (Klare, 1974-1975; Rush, 1985). With some adjustments, it works with Spanish as well as English (Fry, 1986). It has been validated on a range of primary and secondary materials, and its scores correlate highly with those from other formulas as well as with comprehension scores and oral reading errors. (Fry, 1977; Klare, 1974-1975). Furthermore, sentence complexity, certainly an important factor in level of difficulty, correlates "very highly" with sentence length. One extensive review of readability assessment has concluded that simple word and sentence counts "can provide satisfactory predictions for most purposes" (Klare, 1974-1975, pp. 100-101).

However, studies of the Fry Graph have issued warnings.

For one thing, it has been shown to underestimate the difficulty of texts. The recommendation based on this work is to use an adjustment factor of $+ .865$ with the graph (Guidry and Knight, 1976; Rush, 1985). Therefore, in this study all readability scores are reported as adjusted by this factor. A second point is that three samples of 100 words each for any one text, as Fry has suggested, may not provide a reliable estimate of readability. The remedy is to use one-half or more of a text (Fitzgerald, 1981; Rush, 1985). In accordance with this advice, 72 percent of the communications in this study were analyzed in their entirety. For 13 percent, 50 to 90 percent of the entire text was used, and for longer pieces (2-6 pages) from three to seven samples were used. Such a sampling procedure should increase the reliability of this study.

A general complaint about readability formulas is that they are limited to only a syntactic (sentence length) and a semantic factor (vocabulary). They "do not address the interactive nature of the reading process" nor do they assess readers' "interest, experience, knowledge, and motivation" (Rush, 1985, p. 274). They do not take account of style, organization, punctuation, tone, sentence complexity, page density, or print size (Davison and Kantor, 1982; Dreyer 1984; Roit and Pfohl, 1984; Rush, 1985). All these factors enter into the readability of any text. Accordingly, they will also be considered in this study.

Results: Readability of Materials

The mean readability level of the 67 letters, notices, reports, and newsletters written for parents in English was mid 10th grade. The range went from 6th grade to off the graph (higher than college level). There was not much variation in the mean readability level for each school. The range was grade 9 to grade 11, with two of the six schools at grade 10 and two at grade 11. It is interesting to note that the lowest level of all was for a piece on how parents should read to their children sent out as "News for Parents" and written by a "reading and study skills specialist from Houston." The mean level of this letter was 5th grade, with the four samples ranging from 3rd to 7th grades. Since this piece was so unusual, it is not included in the sample means. Table 1 shows the distribution of the other

103 samples. The two samples in Spanish were written at the mid 8th grade level.

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF SAMPLES BY GRADE LEVEL

<u>Grade Level</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Cumulative Percentage</u>
6	2	2
7	5	7
8	34	41
9	15	56
10	15	71
11	7	78
12	9	87
13	4	91
14	4	95
15	0	95
16	1	96
Over 17	5	101

As mentioned previously, other factors enter into readability besides the length of sentences and words. One obvious such factor is appearance. Many of these communications were decorated with attractive art work and included witty maxims and poems. Their print was typewriter size, either pica or elite, both within the range of satisfactory legibility. All the samples except one were in black or blue (mimeo) print on white paper, the most legible combinations of colors. The nutrition bulletin from the local college of agriculture was printed in black on blue paper, also providing adequate legibility (Tinker, 1965). However, some samples were written in italic type or entirely in capital letters; neither of these styles is as easy to read as the more usual lowercase roman type (Tinker, 1965). In addition, in some cases the mimeographed copies were very light and in other cases the text was handwritten and afterwards mimeo-

graphed; neither of these conditions provides the best legibility. Another point having to do with appearance is the placement of the text on the page (Roit & Pfohl, 1984). There are numerous examples when this was not considered; if the text is three lines long, for instance, it looks more attractive if it is centered on the page with wide margins all around instead of bunched up at the top of the page with narrow margins on three sides and a very large one at the bottom.

Other factors involved in readability have to do with the content of the message (Davison & Kantor, 1982; Dreyer, 1984; Roit & Pfohl, 1984; Rush, 1985). The tone of these communications was enthusiastic, persuasive, and cheerful or firm as the situation warranted. Often headings were used in a way to improve the organization of the message. In some instances, obscure terms were defined; probation, for instance, was explained in this way: "if you do not participate in the parent program, your child will not be eligible to attend the CPC." In other cases, however, terms were not defined. Words like dire, responsible adult, pertinent or scientific terms like antibodies, metabolism, riboflavin are probably obscure enough that the audience of parents might not know their meanings. Furthermore, complex sentences can hinder understanding. The following sentence is not only long and complex, with a subordinate clause containing three prepositional phrases and one adverbial phrase, but it also contains several terms which might not be clear:

"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." A final point concerning mechanics. On several pages there were as many as six mechanical errors such as misspellings or wrong punctuation.

END OF PART I

In the next issue of READING HORIZONS, the second part of this study will discuss the probable level of these parents' education in order to make reasonable inferences about the match between the readability of these materials and the ability of the parents to read them. Parents' own statements about their education will be examined as well as state figures on the education of public aid recipients.
