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# READING EDUCATION: A TWENTY-YEAR PERSPECTIVE

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Almost twenty years ago, Nila Banton Smith, in her book American Reading Instruction (1965), mused about the future developments in reading education:

Undoubtedly, brilliant new insights (in reading) will be revealed, ingenious new techniques of experimentation will be evolved, more effective methods and materials will be devised. Possibilities of such developments portend opportunities for unlimited achievement in the future (p. 426).

While it may be argued that this is an overly optimistic statement, especially in light of actual developments in reading education during this period, there is the belief by many that the field of reading has seen a number of significant issues addressed in the last twenty years. The question of what these concerns have been and the identification of those who have done significant work in these areas are the bases for this study.

## The Study

One hundred and seventeen national leaders in the field of reading education were selected at random from those listed in Graduate Programs and Faculty in Reading (1981), to participate in this study, on the basis of their experience and accomplishments (prominent research, major publications, and holding of national office such as I. R. A. President or board of directors).

The questionnaire (Figure 1) was designed to collect information related to significant changes in reading education during the last twenty years and the identification of specific people who have been instrumental in these developments. Fifty responses were received, and it is on the basis of these that the following observations are made.

## FIGURE 1

- I. The following are some of the areas in reading education which have seen significant change or development in the last twenty years. Please select the five areas you feel have had the most impact and rank them, with #1 being

the most important.

- \_\_\_\_\_ A. Changes in the philosophy, content, and organization of basal readers.
- \_\_\_\_\_ B. Research and development in comprehension.
- \_\_\_\_\_ C. "Return to the basics" movement in reading education.
- \_\_\_\_\_ D. Psycholinguistics and the development of whole language.
- \_\_\_\_\_ E. New developments in the assessment of reading difficulties.
- \_\_\_\_\_ F. The study of the relationship between reading and the other language areas of listening, speaking, and writing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ G. Increased emphasis on the training of classroom teachers in reading education.
- \_\_\_\_\_ H. The development of special programs and instructional procedures in reading for children with various handicaps.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I. The importance of reading in the content areas at all levels.
- \_\_\_\_\_ J. Changes in the area of children's/adolescent literature.
- \_\_\_\_\_ K. Other.

II. Briefly indicate why you made these selections.

III. Many people have made and are making significant contributions in the field of reading education. Please list five people you consider who have made the most significant contributions to reading in the last twenty years. You might also include a brief statement as to why you selected these individuals.

## Results and Discussion

The results of the first question, which asked for a ranking of the areas in reading education that have seen significant change or development in the last twenty years, are shown in Table I on the following page.

Clearly item B, research and development in comprehension, with 21 responses (or almost 50% of the sample) indicating this as being their number one change or development in reading, shows the relative importance of this area. In addition, a total of 37 people placed this item in their top five choices.

Table I

Ranking of the Five Most Significant  
Changes in Reading Education

Statement	Selection					Total
	1	2	3	4	5	
B	21	8	3	4	1	37
D	8	11	5	2	4	32
F	7	4	9	7	1	26
A	7	4	5	2	3	21
I	6	5	5	9	10	35

Sample comments from those who made this selection include the following:

I have taught reading for 32 years and believe this is the single most important change I have seen and heeded. Previously, I thought I was "teaching" comprehension (in the classroom), but after perusing literature in this area, I realize I was simply assessing it.

The most important change of the last 20 years has been the interest in and improvement in the "how" of comprehension instruction in both reading and content classes.

Comprehension research deserves top billing. The work of Anderson and his colleagues at the Center for the Study of Reading, Univ of Ill, has had a major impact on how we comprehend comprehension.

Selection of comprehension is obvious. It's also the only thing being funded, too!

Areas D and F dealt with psycholinguistics and the integration of the components of language. A consensus related to these topics emphasized the influence of psycholinguistic research on current thinking in reading and the importance of reading as an integral aspect of language. Note several of the respondents' comments:

I believe the most important contributions to the pedagogy of reading come from the view that reading is a part of the total language process.

These two areas are clearly related to our increased understanding of the manner in which the reading process works and the psychological and sociological factors which impinge upon the development of literacy.

Reading cannot be separated from the other language arts--why teach reading if it is an end in itself?

The psycholinguistic movement, very simply, radically altered our perceptions of the reading process.

Our understanding of how language is acquired has led to major changes in our materials and strategies for beginning reading. Perhaps this thrust will eventually lead to improved knowledge of comprehension (which the present "comprehension research" probably won't).

Item A was concerned with changes in the basal reader; though not the first choice, this item did elicit a number of forthright comments:

Basals have changed and they remain the most economical pupil-appropriate form of mass instruction.

The most important negative change has been the devolution of basal readers into the terrible basals of the mid-1970's. Socially and politically, they may be better but pedagogically they are a disaster. Too hard, too soon; too many skills, many of which aren't even reading skills; selections requiring too much work/cultural prior knowledge.

Basals are used in 90% of classrooms and now reflect our multicultural society--also multi-age, multi-class composition. They are better in innumerable ways and will improve even more with recent attention being given to them.

Unfortunately, the changes in basals have reflected a skills orientation which has been slow to reach publishers and classroom teachers.

The fifth area selected was item I, which dealt with reading in the content areas. It was pointed out that it has been only in the most recent past that this part of reading has received attention:

Reading is an entry to content and the world of knowledge. However, active teaching must be done to insure transfer of skills from basals to content texts.

The emphasis on reading in the content area is positive--it encourages secondary teachers to develop and employ reading methodology.

Content area teachers need strategies and training in teaching basic skills and reading and at the same time not depart from content teaching. Areas such as vocational education, music, art, etc., are all neglected.

Change from "every teacher is a teacher of reading" to "every teacher has a responsibility to help his/her students read the text in class."

Worthy of note were several additional comments on other areas:

Subjects which were taboo in children's books twenty years ago are part of adolescent literature today (teenage pregnancy, drugs, divorce).

Great emphasis currently being given to writing and writing research. Relationship between reading and writing in the young child also being investigated.

Teacher-pupil interaction and the classroom learning environment of effective teachers is a major area of research in language and reading.

And from one respondent:

If you can find "significant" changes in reading instruction or research in the past 20 years, let me know! In your list from A to J, with diligent reading in the journals, I seem to find only repetitious trivia.

Opportunity was also given to indicate important developments which were not listed. While there was a wide variety of responses to this item, a number were mentioned by more than one respondent. They included these:

- Research on effective classroom instruction.
- Minimal competency testing in reading.
- Study of text differences (narrative vs. expository).
- Recognition of administrative leadership as being a key factor in reading improvement.
- Computers and reading.

The last portion of the survey requested the respondents to list five people considered to have made the most significant contributions to reading over the past twenty years. As previously noted, there were fifty responses to the questionnaire. Of these, thirty-one had data entered for this part of the survey. There were variations in the number of contributors listed--17 listed the 5 names requested, 8 listed fewer, 6 listed more than 5. The tallies have been converted to percentages. Since there are overlaps, the total will be more than 100%. Table 2 shows the rankings of the contributors mentioned most often.

Table II  
Ranking of the Eight Most Frequently  
Named Significant Contributor to Reading Education

Contributor	Percentage
Kenneth Goodman	58
Dolores Durkin	35
Richard Anderson	29
Jeanne Chall	29
P. David Pearson	29
Frank Smith	29
Harold Herber	26
Albert J. Harris	22

In all, 53 names were listed as having made significant contributions to reading. The Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois and the Center for Research and Development in Reading at the University of Wisconsin also received recognition. There was a con-

siderable break following the eighth-ranked name (Albert J. Harris); below this point no name received more than twelve percent. In a number of instances a name was listed by only one respondent.

As the table indicates, Kenneth Goodman's name was listed by more than half the persons completing this part of the survey. Justifications for listing his name included research and writing on the "wholeness of language" for his work on miscue analysis, and for "redefining the reading process."

Interestingly, Table I lists comprehension as the most significant change in reading; psycholinguistics and whole language is next. However, as is noted on Table II, Dr. Goodman's name was listed on nearly 60% of the responses to Part III of the survey. Comments regarding his contributions referred to his work with miscue analysis and whole language. Statements related to Dr. Durkin's selection recognized her work with early readers, though more frequent were comments related to her work in comprehension. Thus the first two items on Table II seem to be the reverse of the first two items on Table I. But it should be remembered that tabulations for Table II are based upon fewer responses than was the case for Table I.

Of note were comments made by respondents providing a rationale for naming a "significant" contributor. For example:

Each is constantly seeking new ideas and each pushes the profession into thinking differently (re: Kenneth & Yetta Goodman, Dolores Durkin, Frank Smith, & P. David Pearson).

Her book produced two decades of discussion. The great synthesizer of knowledge. For her...insight and heuristics... (re: Jeanne Chall).

Documented what many suspected about instruction; ...continues to contribute--the number of years and the coverage of her research have made her contributions important (re: Dolores Durkin).

The definitiveness. Common sense approach of How to Increase Reading Ability in his work in remediation (re: Albert J. Harris).

Also of note were statements regarding those "...who worked every day in the trenches," the "...instructor who has taught undergraduates and ...graduates, inspiring them



...leading them to seek, to find, discover and develop knowledge that has helped children learn..." And an important reminder "...I do believe that a great deal of what we think today reflects the sound foundation that was laid down 25 to 35 years ago..."

From their investigations, Page and Moore (1982) settled upon six areas of significant research: Miscue Analysis, Cognitive Research, Reading Readiness, Reading in the Content Areas, The Great Debate about Beginning Reading Instruction, and Teacher Effectiveness. Our data closely parallels the findings of Page and Moore.

As a final point, Moore (1984) makes a trenchant observation for all: "Again, I emphasize the distinction between what goes on in academia and what goes on in classrooms. The fruits of all the attention generated by research and researchers deemed significant may or may not have been transferred to actual schooling effects."

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