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MODELS OF THE READING PROCESS HELD BY ABE AND GED INSTRUCTORS

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During the past several years a great deal of research has been conducted regarding the nature and extent of adult illiteracy in the United States (Harris and Associates, 1970; Northcutt et al, 1975; Hunter and Harmin, 1979). All studies concluded that approximately 20 to 30 million adults are functionally incompetent readers. Books proposing solutions to this problem and descriptions of instructional strategies unique to adult disabled readers have also appeared (Bowren, 1977; Neuman, 1980; Kozol, 1980; Jones 1981).

Research has highlighted the importance of identifying an instructor's conceptual framework and the effect it has on the instructional process (DeFord, 1979). How one views the reading process dramatically affects how one teaches reading. This research study explores the theoretical construct of reading held by instructors of adult disabled readers. Two central questions explored are: "What models of the reading process do instructors of Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Educational Development (GED) courses have?" and "Does the number of reading courses the teachers have taken correlate with their model of the reading process?"

Methodology

In order to determine how ABE and GED instructors viewed the reading process, we administered the DeFord Theoretical Orientation to the Reading Process (TORP) to 148 ABE and GED instructors throughout the state of Illinois. The TORP is a 28 item Likert scale questionnaire which was validated by DeFord in 1979. This instrument differentiates teachers according to their theoretical orientations to reading. The three orientations used by DeFord are: (1) phonics or smaller than word emphasis, (2) whole words with multiple skills for dealing with print and (3) a "meaning making" view in which one deals with language as a natural process. Sample questions from the TORP include the following:

"When children (adults) do not know a word, they should be instructed to sound out its parts."

"The use of a glossary or dictionary is necessary in determining the meaning and pronunciation of new words."

"When coming to a word that's unknown, the reader should be encouraged to guess based upon meaning and go on."

Instructors who strongly agreed with the first statement should be classified as phonics model instructors; those who strongly agreed with the second statement would be whole word/skills instructors; those strongly agreeing with the third statement could be considered to view reading from a whole language or "meaning making" model.

Research Findings

The results of this questionnaire administered to 42 GED and 106 ABE instructors are contained in the following tables.

TABLE I
MODELS OF ORIENTATION TO THE READING PROCESS

(n = 148)

	Phonics	Skills	Meaning Maker	Total
GED	8 (19%)	34 (80%)	0	42
ABE	38 (36%)	67 (63%)	1 (.009%)	106
Total	46 (31%)	101 (68%)	1 (.009%)	148

Of the 148 instructors surveyed, 31% scored in the phonics range, 68% in the skills range and less than 1% scored in the meaning making range. More than twice as many ABE instructors scored in the phonics model range than did the GED instructors. GED instructors have a greater tendency to favor a skills model of reading over a phonics model. Eighty percent of the GED instructors had a skills model of reading while only 63% of the ABE instructors had a skills model of reading.

The second question explored in this study dealt with the number of reading courses ABE and GED instructors had taken and their orientation to the reading process. Tables II and III present this data:

TABLE II
NUMBER OF READING COURSES TAKEN COMPARED WITH
MODELS OF THE READING PROCESS (GED INSTRUCTORS)

(n = 42)

Number of Courses	Phonics	Skills	Meaning Maker
0 (n = 12)	1 (8%)	11 (92%)	0
1-3 (n = 14)	4 (29%)	10 (71%)	0
4-6 (n = 9)	0	9 (100%)	0
7+ (n = 4)	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	0
# not stated (n = 3)	1 (33%)	2 (66%)	0
Total	8 (19%)	34 (81%)	0

TABLE III
 NUMBER OF READING COURSES TAKEN COMPARED WITH
 MODELS OF THE READING PROCESS (ABE INSTRUCTORS)
 (n = 106)

Number of Courses	Phonics	Skills	Meaning Maker
0 (n = 18)	6 (33%)	12 (66%)	0
1-3 (n = 42)	13 (31%)	29 (69%)	0
4-6 (n = 28)	14 (50%)	14 (50%)	0
7+ (n = 10)	4 (40%)	5 (50%)	1 (10%)
# not stated (n = 8)	1 (12%)	7 (88%)	0
Total	38 (36%)	67 (63%)	1 (1%)

There appears to be a slight correlation between the number of reading courses one has taken and one's orientation to the reading process for GED instructors. Those who have taken some reading courses tend to be more skills oriented. ABE instructors who have taken four or more reading courses appear to be about equally divided in terms of their phonics and skills orientations. Again, only one instructor in our sample fell into the meaning making model.

Discussion and Implications

In an earlier study the authors made of adult disabled readers which included 100 ABE and GED students who read at a grade equivalent of 5.0 or lower as measured by standardized tests, we discovered (through the use of the Burke interview) that adults who were poor readers did not read for sentence and passage meaning as does the proficient reader (Keefe, Meyer 1980). Instead these adults viewed reading as a task involving "sounding out" (phonics model) and word identification (whole word/skills model). Only 15% of the 100 adults sampled saw reading as a meaning making activity. A noteworthy finding was that adults who had a "reading for meaning" orientation improved on standardized reading test scores an average of 1½ to 2 years in a period of three months of reading instruction. On the other hand, tests scored indicated only a three month gain in reading ability per three calendar months for learners who conceptualized reading as either a phonics or whole word/skills process.

It is important for adult students to shift their orientation from phonics or whole word/skills approach to a meaning making model if optimum results are to be achieved. Most teachers are just not aware of the model of reading they carry in their head or

its relationship to other models or its effect upon their students. If the teachers of adult disabled readers hold a phonics/whole word skills model themselves, they will only reinforce the disability model of the student. Classroom activities will tend to reflect the instructor's phonics or whole word/skills bias.

Conclusion

ABE and GED instructors must see reading as a meaning making process if they wish their students to obtain maximum results in reading growth. While more research needs to be conducted in this area, the results of this study suggest that ABE and GED instructors view reading as a process of sounding out words or learning specific skills. Psycholinguists such as the Goodmans (1977), Smith (1979), Harste and Burke (1978), and others have substantiated that effective and efficient readers are those who are able to get the meaning. Reading as a meaning making process must begin to occupy the central position in ABE and GED programs.

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