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# BEGINNING READERS' PERCEPTIONS OF READING AND READING INSTRUCTION

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Recent research has indicated young children beginning to read are confused in regard to the purpose and nature of the task (Reid, 1966; Downing, 1979; Francis, 1973; Johns, 1980). As a result, attention has begun to focus on the child's view of reading and learning how to read.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly review relevant research concerned with the child's perception of reading, and to examine possible reasons for the confusion.

## What Research Literature Says

Research clearly supports the notion that the young child entering first grade or kindergarten may be misinformed or confused about the purpose for reading.

Vernon (1957) was one of the first to emphasize the cognitive confusion of the child when presented with the task of learning to read. Since then, interviews with young children have supported these findings about the confusion toward the written language. Reid (1966) found that five year olds in her study failed to recognize a purpose for the written language, being unsure whether to read the pictures or the "marks" on the paper. Five classes of first graders, when Weintraub and Denny (1965) asked "What is reading?" showed a fourth of the answers expressed no logical meaningful purpose for learning to read. A third had no idea how it was to be accomplished.

A more recent interview (Johns & Ellis, 1976) investigated the concepts that students in grades one through eight had about reading. Findings revealed that "students' views of reading were restricted and often described reading as anxiety occurring in the classroom using textbooks, workbooks, or reading groups" (p. 115).

The beginning reader is confused not only about the purpose for reading but also about the language involved in its instruction. The child's attempt to make sense of the task of learning to read is further complicated by the "language instruction register" (DeStefano, 1978). They do not know the technical jargon teachers use to teach reading. Studies (Reid, 1966; Meltzer & Herse, 1969; Clay, 1972; Kingston, Weaver & Figa, 1972) have noted the confused concepts children have for the terms word, letter, and so nd, often confusing "writing" with "drawing" and "letter" with "number". Beginners' perceptions of speech segments do not usually coincide with the units of "word" and "sound" in the register used by the teacher.

The way reading is currently taught may lack consideration of the thought that beginning readers may not know the use of words like letter, word, sentence, and sound. These words, says Francis, are not "so much a direct aid to instruction but a challenge to find their meaning" (1973, p. 22).

#### Reasons for Misconceptions

Fitts and Posner (1967), and more recently Pidgeon (1979), view the child's confusion about reading as one caused by reading instruction geared one level above that necessary for children to become aware of the skills necessary for the task. Bruner (1971) provides a vivid account of what a beginning skill-learner must deal with:

a skilled action requires recognizing the features of a task, its goals, and means appropriate to its attainment; a means of converting this information into appropriate action, and a means of getting feedback that compares the objective sought with present state attained (p. 112).

Thus, before children can deal with the linkage of instructional terms such as "first sound," "letter," or "word" that are used so frequently in readiness activities, they must have an understanding of these terms and the relationship between them. The beginner must discover what the skill is used for, its function, the salient aspects of the task to attend to, the technical concepts, and the jargon for talking and thinking about the skill. In other words, a person in an unfamiliar situation must find out what to do.

Another reason for the child's confusion about reading is not being able to see the relationship between the many skills presented in reading instruction and the reading process (Artley, 1980). Before a child can make the connection between skill work and reading, more purposeful reading and writing throughout the school day must be arranged. For most children, the concept of reading is derived when they are asked to take out a reading book or complete a skill sheet. The actual task of learning to read, then, must seem insurmountable. When a skill sheet is completed, another is presented; when one list of words is learned, a longer one is required; and, of course, when one basal is completed, another replaces it immediately (Kingston, 1979).

The incomprehensible aspects of instruction itself further emphasizes the confusion experienced by the young child (Smith, 1977). The teacher's role of breaking down words to sounds, written words to letters, and meaningless drills and exercises has, according to Goodman (1976) been reduced to one of a technician in a highly structured delivery system.

Factors outside the school have also contributed to the child's lack of understanding of the reading process. Since the advent of television, an increasing lack of literature in the home for leisure time activities has been observed. Likewise, fewer and fewer children see their parents or brothers and sisters reading, and so few are being read to regularly that the purpose for the "marks" on the page and their relationship to one another is not clear. Furthermore,

society's demands on the six year old to learn to read is not the motivating force that it is for oral language. Perhaps, if the same interest were exhibited in written language that is shown in oral language, the young child would view the reading act in a clearer and more positive manner.

### Summary

Research has clearly shown that the child beginning to read is often confused by the task. The reasons for their misconceptions appear to be linked to factors both in the home and at school. The important task ahead is to identify those specific factors and plan situations that will enable the child to realize that language, spoken and written, serves a communicative function.

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