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ISSUES AND TRENDS: IRA NATIONAL CONVENTIONS, 1962-1977

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During the past year several writers have provided insights into the history of reading theory, instruction, and organizations (Chall, 1977; Jerrolds, 1977; Morrison and Austin, 1977; Robinson (Ed.), 1977). Data from such materials capture the developmental dimensions of reading research, programs and curricula.

The International Reading Association national convention reflects interests of many reading experts and practitioners in the U.S. as well as in some foreign countries. Comparing several convention programs during a specified time frame will allow one to identify major issues and trends in the field of reading.

This article is an analysis of national IRA conventions spanning the years 1962-1977. It is an attempt to assess past directions, which may in turn affect current as well as future reading concerns.

METHODOLOGY

Four representative conventions, spaced at five-year intervals (1962, 1967, 1972, and 1977) were selected for in-depth examination. All data used in this study were gathered from advance programs published in *The Reading Teacher*. A topical categorization scheme was developed on the basis of a content analysis of the titles of all meetings open to the general public. A total of 99 topics were identified by this method. Related topics were later combined to facilitate data analysis.

The topical categorization scheme was used to classify the specific topic(s) identified in each meeting. In some cases more than one topic was identified. For example, "Throwing a Lifesaver to Content Reading Through Peer Tutoring" was classified by two topic categories: (1) content reading skills, and (2) volunteers, tutors, or paraprofessionals.

The amount of time devoted to a topic was also noted. In cases where two or more topics were identified for a meeting, an equal amount of time was assigned to each topic. In the above one-hour session, each of the two topics was tallied as 30 minutes.

Other categorization schemes were devised to record information about the lead speaker of each meeting. Here the assumption was made that the lead speaker either organized the meeting, or was selected as the person best suited to introduce the meeting's topic(s). Information gathered on these speakers included their professional affiliation, the IRA region they represented, and their sex.

A total of 775 meetings conducted during the four conventions were classified according to these various schemes. Findings of the study centered around several key questions. Responses to these questions were provided in

terms of each convention year so that comparisons could be made among the various years.

Research Questions.

1. How many topics were included?
2. What was the total convention time, adding times of all individual meetings?
3. How many new (not included in previously examined conventions) topics were introduced and what percentage of the total convention did they represent?
4. What was the median total time spent on each topic?
5. What percentage of total convention time was spent on the 10 topics allotted most time?
6. What percentage of lead speakers were from the various institutional categories?
7. What percentage of lead speakers represented the different IRA regions?
8. What percentage of lead speakers were male and what percentage female?

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

These research questions were answered by computer analysis of the data. Relevant information was organized in various tables keyed to the specific questions. A complete set of these tables is available, upon request, from the author. The following conclusions were supported by these data tables:

- *More time was devoted to further analysis of previously introduced topics than to new topics during the 1972 and 1977 convention years.* The total number of topics introduced during each convention (1962 - 40 topics; 1967 - 68 topics; 1972 - 69 topics; 1977 - 86 topics) continued to expand, but the number of new topics declined considerably. The 1977 meetings included 86 topics, the most of any previous year; however, only nine new topics were introduced.
- *The median total time spent on each topic as well as the total convention time greatly increased from 1962-1977.* The total convention time approximately doubled every five years (1962 - 105 hours; 1967 - 270 hours; 1972 - 403 hours; 1977 - 819 hours). Likewise, the median amount of time spent on each topic doubled from 1962-1972 (1962 - $1\frac{3}{4}$ hours; 1967 $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours; 1972 5 hours) and increased by almost a half from 1972-1977 (1972 - 5 hours; 1977 - 7 hours). This increased time parallels the general growth of IRA membership, which more than doubled in the past 10 years (Chall, 1977).
- *Prior to 1967 the elementary students topic received more emphasis than the secondary students topic. Following this year, however, the secondary level predominated.* The increased convention time spent on secondary school concerns is evidence that educators perceived a need for greater improvement at the secondary level.

- *Minority student concerns were among the list of topics receiving most convention time during the 1972 and 1977 conventions.* This finding may be due to a general concern for equal educational opportunity for all learners. The recurrence of the remedial or learning disability students topic in 1977 may also be a result of PL 94-142 legislation.
- *The topic of comprehension was given more time than any other topic during the 1977 year. Prior to this year comprehension had not appeared on the list of topics allocated most time.* This spotlighting of a fundamental reading skill is also a focus of several recent research and writing efforts during the mid 70's.
- *The language experience method continued as a popular topic in three of the four convention years [1962, 1972 and 1977].* This finding may parallel educators' continuing interest in the importance of language-based instruction.
- *Competency or performance based instruction continued to gain attention during the 1977 convention after being introduced in the 1972 meetings.* This comes as no surprise if one considers the fact that several states have passed some type of competency based legislation, while others are debating the issue.
- *Volunteers, student or parent tutors, and paraprofessionals were among those who played an important role in the teaching of reading in the mid 70's.* Current reading programs encourage individualization of instruction which often can require additional personnel to work with students or assist in material preparation. School budgets, however, have experienced staff cuts rather than expansions. The logical solution is to involve others in the teaching-learning process. The 1977 convention provided information concerning these alternative assistants.
- *The topic of research design and reports of research studies increased from 1962-1967, but dropped sharply after 1967. On the other hand, for the first time in 1977, practical classroom instructional procedures received a substantial percentage of time.* A perusal of articles published in the 1977 issues of *The Reading Teacher* as compared to those in 1962 issues confirms this trend.
- *The majority of lead speakers were from universities or four-year colleges each year, with the exception of 1972, when local school districts provided the majority.* This increased participation of local school personnel could not be fully explained on the basis of data gathered in this study.
- *Lead speakers from the federal government were given a greater percentage of time in the 70's than in earlier years.* With fundings available from the federal government in the early 70's for such programs as Right to Read, this trend seems quite logical.
- *The East coast continued to dominate the other IRA regions as it provided most lead speakers each year, despite the convention's changing locations, in regions other than the East.* This region has also continued to provide the greatest percentage of general IRA members. Exempting years during which a given region hosted the convention, the percentage

of speakers from other regions seems rather stable. The South East region shows the most steady growth, though.

- An attempt to avoid sexual discrimination was substantiated by the nearly equal percentages of male and female lead speakers in the 1977 convention. During this slightly more than half of the speakers were female, compared to previous years when the percentage of males exceeded females.

SOME ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS ON THESE FINDINGS

The fact that the IRA convention as well as the organization as a whole continues to grow at a rapid rate is evidence that educators are truly committed to the field of reading. When and where the national convention's growth finally will level off is difficult to predict, but the peak has not occurred yet. Sometime in the next few years, however, the convention will reach maximum size out of necessity. There are currently only a handful of cities that can house this annual event. But, the excellence of the convention certainly will continue.

It is gratifying to see that a trend toward quality, in-depth investigation of previously introduced topics now seems to be stressed rather than a superficial coverage of an excess of new topics each year. By devoting more time to a smorgasboard core of topics, several speakers provide a variety of viewpoints, thus offering the audience a wider scope of information.

It is clear that the IRA national convention recently geared itself to the immediate needs of the practitioner. The focus of attention is away from the ivory towers of learning toward the nitty-gritty concerns of those on daily classroom firing lines. The convention is now a mecca for persons seeking practical teaching ideas and procedures. What a fantastic inservice program!

The increasing number of speakers from other institutions beside the four-year college or university is proof that local school districts, state agencies, the federal government, etc. also have valuable information to present. A greater input from these sources also indicates a genuine interest and excitement in sharing ideas with other concerned educators. This spreading enthusiasm is visible to anyone attending the national convention.

The decreased emphasis on research and theory is somewhat puzzling, however, because the reading education profession actually conducts more, rather than less research each successive year. But the decreased convention time devoted to research may indicate that researchers do not translate their studies into many useable suggestions for the practitioner. Convention participants, for example, may feel that their time is better spent in a session providing concrete ideas about how to improve students' comprehension, than in a session merely outlining the relationship between syntax and comprehension. Perhaps researchers need to devote more than just the last few minutes of their presentations to meaningful teaching implications.

A stabilized focus of attention past the elementary level of reading

instruction is encouraging. Educators now concur that “learning to read” and “reading to learn” should be emphasized well into the secondary years. The 1976 National Assessment of Educational Progress also confirms a need for improved instruction at the secondary level. There the reading concerns, of course, touch all subject-area teachers, not just the reading specialist.

Three cheers for the newly emerging emphasis on comprehension. For too many years we “phonicized” our children to the extent that many became beautiful word callers rather than individuals who read. Hopefully this attention on comprehension will continue in the conventions to come.

Applause also goes to the recent trend toward many sessions devoted to the needs of minority students, including gifted, learning disabled, and bilingual learners. Indeed, America is a pluralistic nation, and its children attend school with many diverse needs. The needs of those other than the average, developmental readers are now a stable focus of the IRA national convention.

Finally, it will be interesting to see if competency or performance based instruction topics continue to hold a popular slot in the upcoming conventions. If this interest is only cyclic, as are many topics in education, these topics may not appear on the most popular list during the 1982 year. By that time there probably will be some new panacea presented to solve the problems faced by reading educators.

One gains a better understanding of contemporary reading concerns by examining the short-term issues and longer-term trends raised in previous years. As one realizes what was emphasized previously, these insights provide a perspective from which to better examine current situations. Records of the IRA national conventions are an excellent source that provide a more complete sense of history concerning the field of reading.

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