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Jerome C. Harste
Indiana University

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Western Michigan University
Dorothy J. McGinnis Reading Center and Clinic

UNDERSTANDING THE HYPOTHESIS, IT'S THE TEACHER THAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

PART I

Jerome C. Harste

INDIANA UNIVERSITY

Research Establishing the Pervasiveness of the Teacher Variable

Any explication of the essential components of an effective reading program will likely include a discussion of the teacher's role. Research findings have made it abundantly clear that the single most important element of an effective reading program is the regular classroom teacher. Many other factors are important, of course, but these research findings suggest pupil success or failure is most directly related to the "teacher variable" in the teaching of reading.

One of the best known research efforts related to the teaching of reading is the Cooperative Research Program in First Grade Reading Instruction, reported in detail in the *Reading Research Quarterly* (Bond and Dykstra, 1967). This research program involved twenty-seven individual studies carried on in various parts of the United States. The studies attempted to discover if there was an approach to initial reading instruction that would produce superior reading and spelling achievement at the end of grade one. Various instructional approaches, including the linguistic, basal, language experience, and i.t.a., were evaluated in terms of standardized measures of reading achievement.

Though Dykstra (1971) reported that there were problems in making sure that each approach was used in a pure form, the study's findings and conclusions were significant. In the first place the study pointed out that children seem to learn to read by a variety of materials and methods. The authors stated ". . . no one approach is so distinctively better in all situations and respects than the others that it should be considered the one best method and the one to be used exclusively" (Bond and Dykstra, 1967). The message was clear: Improved reading achievement is not a function solely of approach or method. The authors continue:

> Future research might well center on teaching and learning situation characteristics . . . The tremendous range among classrooms within any method points out the importance of elements in the learning situation over and above the methods employed. *To improve reading instruction, it is necessary to train better teachers of reading rather than to expect a panacea in the form of materials.* (p. 11)

Similar statements have been made by others. Ramsey (1962), in an evaluation of three groupings procedures for teaching reading, concluded, "The thing that the study probably illustrates most clearly is that the in-

fluence of the teacher is greater than that of a particular method, a certain variety of materials, or a specific plan of organization. *Given a good teacher, other factors in teaching reading tend to pale to insignificance.*"

Harris and Morrison (1969) reiterated this conclusion. These authors reported a three-year study of two approaches to teaching reading, basal readers vs. language experience. They found, as did Bond and Dykstra, that differences in mean reading scores *within* each method were much larger than differences between methods and approaches:

> The results of the study have indicated that the teacher is far more important than the method. Clearly procedures such as smaller classes and provision of auxiliary personnel may continue to give disappointing results if teaching skills are not improved. It is recommended, therefore, that in-service workshops and expert consultive help be provided for all teachers and especially for those with minimal experience. (p. 339)

These studies have helped to establish the importance of the teacher variable in the teaching of reading. They have, in fact, stimulated much subsequent research as the sections entitled, "Teacher Preparation and Practice" in the Annual Summaries of Investigations Relating to Reading (Weintraub, *et al.,* 1973-74, 1974-75, 1975-76) attest. The teacher variable has been studied from a number of perspectives and always in the hope of finding and identifying the one variable which makes, or seems to make, the qualitative difference. Some examples of the dimensions of this variable most recently studied include the following: training (Roeder, Beal and Eller, 1973; Ahern and White, 1974; Garry, 1974), beliefs (Mayes, 1974), felt needs (Rutherford and Weaver, 1974; Yarington and Kotler, 1973), problems encountered in teaching reading (Litchtman, 1973), as well as information processing differences among teachers (Long and Henderson, 1974).

In spite of the fact that the reading profession has been fairly certain about the importance of the teacher variable and its relationship to pupil achievement in reading for roughly the past decade—its importance was suspected long before that—very little insight has been gained into the variable. After reviewing the research on the teacher variable, it is certainly possible to agree with Jackson (1966) who wrote:

> . . . Almost all the noble crusades that have set out in search of the best teacher and the best method . . . have returned empty-handed. The few discoveries to date . . . are pitifully small in proportion to their cost in time and energy. For example, the few drops of knowledge that can be squeezed out of a half-century of research on the personality characteristics of good teachers are so low in intellectual food value that it is almost embarrassing to discuss them . . . (p. 9).

Part of the reason for this disappointment may be that the teacher variable, although well established as being important, has seldom been studied directly. In fact, if the research which establishes the importance of the teacher variable is closely examined (Bond and Dykstra, 1967; Ramsey, 1962; Harris and Morrison, 1969), one finds that none of these researchers were actually studying the teacher variable directly. Their identification of the variable apparently rests largely on their inability to find significance among and between the variables they were actually studying.

Recently Singer (1974) has suggested, from his analysis of low-achieving and high-achieving schools, that we modify the hypothesis that it's the teacher who makes the difference. "The more adequate hypothesis," he states, "is that to the degree that the faculty, including the principal, is trained, committed to, and implements any valid system of reading instruction now available, will there be a cumulative and significant difference in reading achievement." Although Singer doesn't title his hypothesis, I interpret him as recommending that *internal program thrust and consistency* be studied.

Another suggestion for modifying the hypothesis has been made by Harste and Burke (1976). We propose that the key component of the teacher variable is the teacher's *theoretical orientation.* We operationally define this component as a particular knowledge and belief system about reading which strongly influences critical decision-making related to both the teaching and learning of reading. Our findings suggest that both teachers *and* learners hold particular and identifiable theoretical orientations about reading which in turn significantly effect expectancies, goals, behavior, and outcomes at all levels.

Although Singer (1974) does not propose that theoretical orientation is the key dimension of internal program thrust and consistency which he recommends be studied, our findings suggest that such an exploration would be fruitful. In fact, if a school system had adopted a particular instructional program, had made sure it was being implemented appropriately, and had chosen criterion measures in accordance with the thrust of the program, we would argue that the variable of theoretical orientation was the key component of this thrust. An explication of the notion of theoretical orientation as well as examples drawn from four years of field observation follows.

A New Hypothesis for Reading Teacher Research: Both the Teaching and Learning of Reading are Theoretically Based

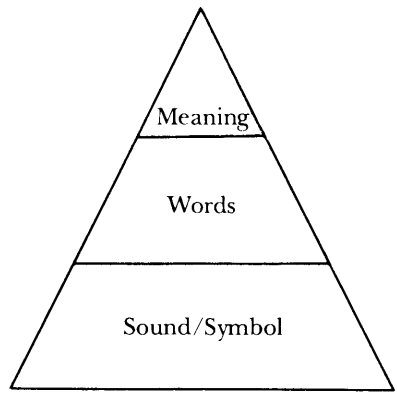
Because of our involvement in the teaching and supervision of college students within reading practicum experiences, we have constant entry to a number of public school classrooms. One exciting dimension of this experience is the exploration of the teacher's role in assisting children with their acquisition of reading competency. What has become both readily apparent and surprisingly persistent concerning the relationship between reading instruction and the reading process is that: (1) despite atheoretical statements, teachers are theoretical in their instructional approach to reading, and (2) despite lack of knowledge about reading theory, per se, students are theoretical in the way in which they approach learning to read.

Theoretical Views of Reading

Before defining by example what is meant by theoretical orientation as observable in student and teacher behavior, a verbal definition of the concept seems in order. Put simply, a theory is a system of assumptions through which experiences are organized and acted upon. In terms of cognitive psychology (see Anderson, *et. al.,* 1976), a theoretical orientation is best thought of as a cognitive structure or generalized schemata which governs behavior. Operationally then, a theoretical orientation is a particular knowledge and belief system held toward reading. In practice, this knowledge and belief system operates to establish expectancies and strongly influences a whole host of decisions made by teachers and pupils relative to reading. It is possible to cite a number of theoretical views of the reading process. Singer and Ruddell, in their volume *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading* (1976), present some nine or more such models of the process – an effort which in no way exhausts the field. Current views of reading can be organized into three relatively distinct clusters and perceived as falling along a continuum. Their placement on the continuum is determined by what components of the reading process each cluster is willing to exclude from instructional settings.

One identifiable cluster can be labeled a sound/symbol or decoding orientation. In this instance reading is perceived as an offshoot of oral language, the chief accomplishment of which is dependent upon developing and manipulating the relationships between the sounds of speech and their graphic symbols. While people who hold this view of reading don't argue against the existence of syntax and meaning as components of language, they do not see them as primary factors in the acquisition of the process. Language is perceived as a pyramid, the base of which is sound/symbol relationships, the capstone of which is meaning. Figure 1 illustrates this model.

FIGURE 1: Decoding Model of Reading.

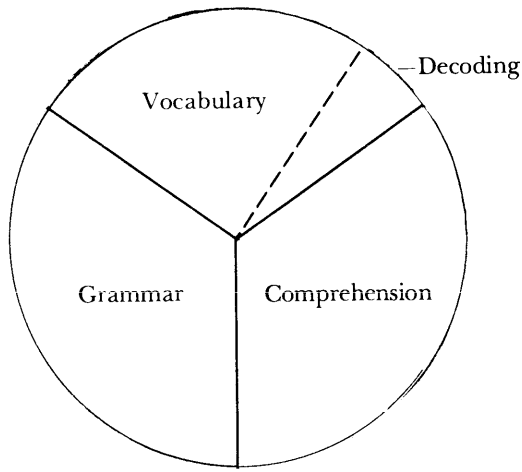


McCracken and Walcutt in the Teachers' Edition of *Basic Reading* (Lippincott, 1963), exemplify this orientation:

> "Do you purpose to define reading as mere word-calling without regard for meaning?"
>
> "Yes we do. Reading is, first of all, and essentially, the mechanical skill of decoding, of turning the printed symbols into the sounds which are language."

A second cluster which views reading as one of four language arts —listening, speaking, reading and writing—can be labeled a skills orientation. The four language arts are seen as being composed of (and thus learned as) a collection of discrete skills which share "common abilities." Figure 2 illustrates this model.

FIGURE 2: Skills Model of Reading.



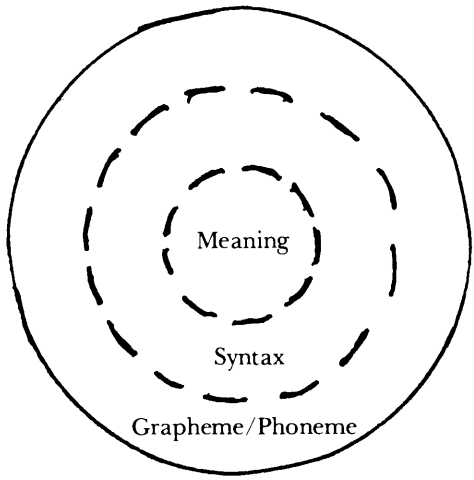
Because language is perceived as a pie from which individual "skill slices" can be extracted for instruction, it becomes a relevant task to develop skill hierarchies. Text book authors who operate out of this model usually provide instruction in all three component areas for each lesson. Because persons holding this model believe the distinctive feature or key to reading success is the word, new vocabulary items are typically introduced prior to reading. Following silent and oral reading a series of comprehension questions are given. Workbook activities complete the model by providing skill practice on usage. Robinson, Monroe, and Artley in the *New Basic Readers* (Scott Foresman, 1962), best illustrate this model and conclude in

the *Teachers' Edition* that one makes sense out of reading by stringing words together. The quote which follows captures this orientation's emphasis on words as well as the notion that reading is a sequential skill mastery process.

> "Initially a child must learn to identify printed individual words and relate them to a meaningful context. This is best done by a) rapidly developing a basic sight vocabulary and b) teaching word recognition skills."

A third theoretical orientation, which we term whole language or language based, views reading as one of four ways in which the abstract concept of language is realized. This orientation assumes not only that the systems of language are shared, but that they are interdependent and interactive aspects of a process. Figure 3 illustrates that under this model language is conceived of as a sphere. This sphere is composed of a meaning core enwrapped in a syntactic structure and sheathed with a phoneme/grapheme system. When aspects of language are focused upon for instructional purposes, the sphere is penetrated and all three systems are extracted simultaneously. In this view, reading, whether or not for instructional purposes, is always focused upon comprehending. Text book authors who compose materials from

FIGURE 3: Language Based Model of Reading.



this perspective often do so building from the oral language base of the reader. Under this view speaking differs from reading only by the addition of the grapheme component in the outer ring of the model. Given this perspective, it follows that reading educators ought to build upon the strong

language systems which the child already has mastered when teaching reading. Scott Foresman Reading systems (Aaron, *et. al.,* 1971), the Sounds of Language Program (Martin and Brogan, 1972), and the core of the LEIR Program (Van Allen, 1974) exemplify this approach. Kenneth Goodman, one of the authors of the Scott Foresman Reading Systems program clearly exemplifies this model when he says:

> "Reading is the active process of reconstructing meaning from language represented by graphic symbols (letters), just as listening is the active process of reconstructing meaning from the sound symbols (phonemes) or oral language." (Smith, Goodman, and Meredith, 1976)

With these examples in mind, it might be well to restate the findings of our field observations; namely, that we found *both teachers and students* to have theoretical orientations to reading (theoretical orientations, we might add parenthetically, as distinctive and different from one another as those described above).

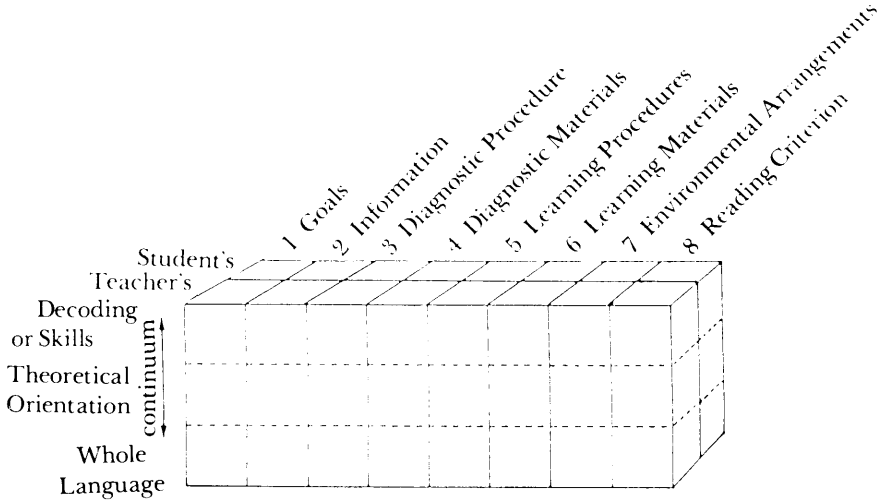
Research Paradigm

The research paradigm used to explore the hypothesis that both the teaching and learning of reading is theoretically based is presented in Figure 4. This paradigm suggests that a study of the decisions made by both teachers and pupils relative to what goals they select, what information or data they use to make decisions as to what progress they (students) or their students (teachers) are making in reading, and the like, are key to the identification of theoretical orientation. It should be noted that this paradigm includes not only a teacher dimension, but also a student dimension. While this is admittedly a new dimension in teacher education research, our inquiry suggests student performance is often key to understanding teacher performance. Put simply, student reading performance, at least in part, mirrors instruction. Put another way, our research suggests a student's predisposition to apply one theoretical model over another is strongly influenced by the instructional environment. Major environmental influences seem to be the classroom teacher's theoretical orientation or model of reading and the text author's theoretical orientation or model of reading. This phenomenon is particularly observable among less proficient readers who appear more dependent upon the model which is available for the development of reading strategies.

Examples of Theoretical Instruction

That the teaching of reading is theoretical in practice is something we learned early in our long series of classroom visits. In one of the first of such visits, for example, the authors watched a first grade teacher teach a reading lesson. After she had completed the lesson, we asked the teacher if she would mind if we would bring our undergraduate reading methods class into her room to see her teach an actual reading lesson, as she personified

FIGURE 4: Research Paradigm.



1. Goals Selected and Weighing of Goals
2. Information Selected for Diagnosis and the Weighing of such Information
3. Diagnostic Procedures To Be Used
4. Diagnostic Materials To Be Used
5. Learning Procedures To Be Used
6. Learning Materials To Be Used
7. Environmental Arrangements To Be Used
8. Reading Criterion To Be Used

the whole-language approach to reading in her teaching. The teacher's response was classic, "This program personifies nothing. I simply teach reading." Despite her disclaimer, what actually transpired in the classroom was clearly whole-language in nature. The teacher had a cucumber in a jar and had obviously had it for several weeks. The cucumber, at the time of this observation, was black with mold. The students were asked to observe the cucumber and to note changes which had taken place from the week prior. As the children offered descriptive statements, the teacher wrote these on the blackboard. In the process of doing this, one student remarked that they could have combined two of the sentences. The teacher immediately picked up on this idea by suggesting that the children think of various ways they could express their ideas about the molding cucumber in the classroom. While the teacher suggested her reading program "per-

sonifies nothing," an analysis of this instructional sequence suggests the operationalization of a whole-language approach to instruction.

Even more obvious were teachers holding a decoding view of reading. They, too, of course, maintained they were "pushing" no reading theory; yet, they repeatedly stressed that the child sound out the word. One teacher, we remember so vividly, was almost a perfect type-class of the theoretical position. Throughout the lesson she had children decode words. Never once during our observations in her classroom did we see her explore with the children the meaning of what they were reading. The story served solely as a vehicle for teaching phonic skills. She, like the theoretical model upon which she was operating, assumed that if the word was decoded, meaning was implicit. Return visits to her classroom found her conducting similar lessons.

Watching teachers work with individual children in reading adds further credence to the theoretical nature of instruction. Interestingly, teacher response repertoires to children who encounter an unfamiliar word in print is especially illuminating of their theoretical orientation. We found few teachers who had expanded repertoires. Most tended toward having a single high priority response pattern. Teachers who represented a decoding theory responded consistently with, "Sound it out," or "What other word do you know that begins with that letter?" Teachers holding a whole-language orientation to reading unknowingly, if their denials mean anything, had a favored response repertoire. The verbal ones prompted, "What do you think that word might be from the rest of the sentence?" The nonverbal ones often offered no help, thereby gaining information as to what strategies the child had for unlocking unfamiliar words encountered in print. Both types of teachers said in post-interviews that they followed this procedure so that children would learn to think about what they were reading to figure out unfamiliar words. Their reasons clearly reflect a theoretical orientation.

Interestingly, as we have mentioned before, teachers had extremely limited response repertoires. We can recall from neither our memories nor our notes a teacher who used all of the responses discussed in this section. The typical pattern was to offer prompts exemplifying a single theoretical orientation.

Not all teacher's responses to pupils were so obvious, however. One teacher, for example, simply and immediately gave the pupil the word if she ever hesitated in oral reading. She was, to an observer, encouraging the pupil to rely on her for cues to unlocking unfamiliar words in print. Because we found her behavior atypical, we purposely observed her classroom on several occasions. She remained consistent. Whenever a child came to an unfamiliar word, she would simply give the word. Because she felt it so important that the child comprehend the material being read, she elected not to interfere in the communicative process of reading, but rather to strengthen it. While this teacher maintained she was atheoretical, her verbal explanation and teacher behavior suggest she was acting out of a consistent theoretical framework.

To further explore the hypothesis that the teaching of reading is theoretically based, we often have extensive interviews with teachers after we observe them teaching. One of our favorite questions is, "Who is the best reader in this class?" This question usually elicited some name, to which we ask, "What does he/she do that makes you think he/she is such a good reader?" Again the responses that this question solicits strongly suggests a theoretical orientation.

"He uses phonics and can really sound out some difficult words."
"She understands everything she reads."
"He really tries to sound out words!"

Because teachers are often uneasy about this line of questioning and some, in fact, probably wisely, asked, "What do you mean by best?" we have been forced to develop a better procedure for eliciting their responses. We do this by asking teachers to rank order from best to worst the readers in their class. We then give those pupils listed as the best reader and the worst reader a Reading Miscue Inventory (Goodman and Burke, 1970). Later in interview with the teachers we play the tapes of these children reading and ask the teacher, after she listens to the tape, to tell us why the pupil was ranked as he was. This procedure, although developed quite recently, permits the teacher to be more explicit in her definition. With her explicitness comes even clearer indications of theoretical orientation, as the following reading miscue worksheet and teacher interview transcript indicate.

Student Worksheet (Tape transcript of oral reading)

THE CLEVER TURTLE

101 One day a man left his village to tend to

102 his field of corn. But he found only an

103 open place where young corn had stood

104 straight and tall.

105 The man looked down at the poor broken

206 stalks and saw a large turtle dozing in

207 the sun. He picked up the turtle and

208 carried him back to the village.[1]

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key—omissions - circled
substitutions - written above word
s - sounds like
RM - repeated miscue

Interview Transcript

Interviewer (I): What would you say about that tape? Does it reflect how this student normally reads?

Teacher (T): Yes. That's a good tape. That's how Jimmy reads. That's really a hard piece, though.

I: Well, we chose the piece so that there would be things the child didn't know. Why did you pick Jimmy as the best reader?

T: Well, because he really sounds out the words well. You can tell that he is using what we've talked about. He really tries to get the word. And he usually does.

Oftentimes we have opportunities to discuss with the teacher things that have transpired while we are observing formal lessons in the classroom. When looking over student papers, one of our favorite questions is, "What do you suppose that means?" pointing to an incorrect response which the pupil had made on a worksheet. How teachers process information, as well as what information is selected for processing, is clearly another measure of theoretical orientation. Similarly, questions such as "Why did you select those materials?" and "Why did you use that approach?" are more often than not good stimuli for responses indicating theoretical orientation.

Probably the most personally surprising result of our observations is the consistency which we see in terms of theoretical orientation across behavior. Theoretical orientation seems consistent through goal, diagnostic materials, and reading criteria selection. We have found no examples of electic behavior (that is, teachers teaching from one theoretical position on one visit and from another on another visit), and this in spite of the fact that several of the teachers reportedly "did a little of everything every day."

End of Part I—(Part Two will appear in Winter '78 issue.)