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We Suggest

Eleanor Buelke

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WE SUGGEST

Eleanor Buelke

Carroll, John B., and Chall, Jeanne S., Editors
Toward A Literate Society
New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975. Pp. xiii + 370.

The reading problem is not just one problem; it is many problems, with a multiplicity of causes and manifestations that are beyond any cold statistical reckoning. . . . It is not only from a sense of sympathy or high-minded altruism that we should show concern. To the extent that illiteracy is significantly present in our nation, the options and resources available to the literate citizen are thereby abridged.

This volume, *Toward A Literate Society*, has grown out of a plan for a comprehensive national effort to achieve universal literacy in the United States, proposed by James E. Allen, Jr., former United States Commissioner of Education. In developing a strategy for implementing his plans, Allen asked for assistance from government, from industry, and from leaders in the academic world. Asked to help, the National Academy of Education responded by authorizing and appointing a Committee on Reading. Committee members have addressed their study and writings to questions concerning a reasonable conception of functional literacy; scientific and technological knowledge we have and need, to make universal literacy a reality; research and development to provide an effective base for reading program efforts; and political and economic dimensions of an all-out effort to achieve literacy during the 1970s.

The book consists of two main parts. Part I is the "Report of the Committee on Reading, National Academy of Education," together with an Appendix concerning "Personnel for the Teaching of Reading." Part II is comprised of the papers commissioned to be written by a number of eminent scholars and participants in new approaches to the teaching of reading. Each paper is insightful, well-documented, and comprehensive. Some of them have been prepared in the nature of reports of research findings and implications. Others are concerned more with theoretical and philosophical rationale, and include inferential conclusions and suggestions for further productive inquiry. Like most studies of complex problems in human behavior and learning, serious, in-depth encounter with many variables leads to some solutions, but inevitably, uncovers other problematic areas, open to debate and pursuant study.

Defining and assessing reading literacy has proved to be just such a problem area. It must be remembered that "reading is an artifact of man and not a product of nature," that at some point in their development humans invented it as a tool to serve their needs. Thus, the acquisition of

literacy skills should consume the least amount of resources to accomplish the maximum attainment of goals. Further, it must be recognized that literacy skills are cognitive processes, not directly observable or interpretable, and, therefore, difficult to assess. Claims of literacy are limited/upheld by manifestations in a person's overt behavior. In this country where efforts are made to serve, simultaneously, the needs of individuals as well as the needs of society, a criterion model for literacy *must* consider characteristics of the individual. Three factors seem relevant: native capacity to learn, environmentally acquired capacity to learn, and motivations. Consequently, a person's literacy is jointly determined by his/her reading ability and the readability of the materials he/she needs to read.

Review of current practices in teaching of beginning reading show that materials, methods, and learning environments are diverse. Trends which emphasize reading instruction as only one component in language and communications areas, and these areas as only part of a child's total development, signal the need for changes in training for teacher expertise. Awareness of other influential variables from the environmental milieu of school children must be considered, too, as part of the greater concerns of education for literacy.

At the other end of the scale, viable programs for adult literacy are certainly warranted, and long overdue. Recent efforts in this area have produced no clear evidence as to the superior effectiveness of any one set of materials, programs, or instructional procedures. Pervasive problems appear to be that present programs nurture the stereotype of the adult literacy student as a person of low self-esteem; that instruction has failed to relate consistently, and on a large scale, to personal as well as occupational needs; and that it is difficult to find qualified teaching personnel. For adult basic education to become a universal reality, some shifts in thinking about its value and the way to achieve it are essential.

Study of programs for literacy training within industry, the armed forces, and penal institutions reveals some measure of success, but the results are hard to assess because most of them have been of short duration. Financial support has not been consistent, and motivation of trainees is hard to maintain. In these categories, literacy programs live and die by economics. Federal funds create or save projects; when institutions must take them over as federal monies are cut off, no one cares enough to see them continued. The most promising programs appear to be found within industry where job opportunities are linked to successive steps of basic education.

On the field of illiteracy, another front of attack that has promise, with concomitant frustrations involving sufficient funding, plus finding effective personnel, is the role of television in the teaching of pre-reading and reading skills. Two chapters of this text are devoted to examination of the special values of this medium. Because it is familiar and usually pleasurable to children, it is acceptable and non-threatening to them. The writers of these chapters believe that television, as a teaching tool, has scope, power,

and sophistication. However, they caution that it has limitations for literacy training in that it is not easily adapted to individual differences in readiness, in rate, and in depth of learning to read. They also suggest that to involve television in a successful major effort to improve literacy will necessitate huge investments in people, equipment, and funds.

Perhaps, for classroom teachers, one of the most interesting, challenging sections of the book is the chapter on “motivational aspects.” Both authors of this chapter have a deep commitment to find ways of educating all children, and they deplore the ways in which the American educational system has masked its mechanism of social selection. They maintain that educational practices and research have been undertaken as if motivation were a personality trait, rather than a result of the environment. They argue that “perseverance at learning is not a function simply of inheritance, early socialization, or current cultural conditions, but, rather, of an interaction of these factors with key aspects of the educational environment.” Deep and extensive modifications of teachers’ attitudes in day-to-day conduct with children, with use of teaching experiences themselves as means of facilitating changes in teacher attitudes, are advocated. Teachers are seen as key persons to set “conditions under which learning can eventually be motivated largely by the expectation of continuing success.”

The last two chapters, dealing with political implications and economic perspectives of a national reading effort, leave the reader with a less than optimistic picture of prompt, effective action in the years ahead. If the project reported here has produced no final solutions, it may, at least, have cast some light upon possibilities for productive inquiry and action, or raised some tentative hope for affirmative answers to some further questions like these:

1. Could this attack on illiteracy force recognition of many endemic symptoms of economic poverty/environmental penury that result in learning difficulties/disabilities?

2. Can government response to very human needs for clean, safe environments, adequate prenatal and childhood nutrition, and consistently good personal and medical care help expedite the nation “toward a literate society?”

3. Will progress toward this goal be characterized by attitudes affirming that the learner’s needs precede those of the delivery systems and institutions which supply the programs?

Whatever directions are taken in the Right-to-Read effort, to settle for anything less than a literate society is to render large segments of the population unable to satisfy their personal needs and to preclude them from full participation in that society. Human future will be only the richer when reading and learning throughout life widens human “capacity to perceive and act upon the openness of the race, the interdependency of all life.”¹ The memorial, frontal page of this book puts it succinctly:

To teach someone to read is to
give him a new world—
a new life in which to grow.

¹Benjamin DeMott, "‘Adult Ed’—The Ultimate Goal," *Saturday Review* (September 20, 1975), p. 29.

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