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Maria Luisa Alvarez Harvey
Jackson State University

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A GOOD TEACHER AND AN ECLECTIC APPROACH: THE HOPEFUL ANSWER TO SUCCESSFUL READING INSTRUCTION

Maria Luisa Alvarez Harvey

JACKSON STATE UNIVERSITY

The sinking feeling that "Johnny can't read" has developed from an unpleasant suspicion to an ugly reality of alarming dimensions and implications. Not only are our methods of reading instruction under scrutiny and attack, but so are our teachers themselves and, to some extent, so is our entire system of American education as it now firmly—and shakily—stands.

Studies show that pupils who place the lowest in the readiness for reading tests given shortly after they start the first grade are the same ones failing reading at the seventh grade; inability to read is probably the number one cause of our high school drop out rate; the reading proficiency of entering freshmen in college all over the United States leaves much to be desired; and the adult functional illiterates can be counted by the hundreds of thousands (13, 4, 12).

Where does the problem lie? And even more important, where lies the remedy? Is the problem basically poor, inadequate teaching methods? Does it rest mainly with the teachers, many of whom are poorly equipped to do the job, or have chosen the profession as a handy means of always having the assurance of a job? Or should we blame the "system," this educational system of ours of which we are so proud because it guarantees the right of an education to every child? Indeed, should we educate every child, adolescent and adult, or should we (as it is done in other countries) train some and educate some others? And with this last suggestion we are of course shifting the blame for the failure to the children themselves.

Obviously, to place all the blame for our failure to "teach" reading on any one of the four possibilities: the methods, the teachers, the system, or the children, is not only to oversimplify the problem, but to misplace the blame as well. Just as in the act of reading a number of factors and processes come simultaneously into play, in the child's reading world the child himself, the methods, the teacher, and the education system merge, and together take part in the hopeful develop-

ment of an individual who can eventually master that complex and as of yet not completely understood act that we call reading.

And while Johnny continues to fail, researchers persist in exploring every possible aspect of the problem. Methodology has received considerable attention while phonics, the kinesthetic approach, the linguistic approach, and programmed methods, have been tried, tested, and often advertised as *the* best, most effective method to teach reading. The most realistic point of view, however, leans toward, and advocates, an eclectic approach as the most effective one. Studies show that although other approaches to beginning reading instruction, such as programmed or linguistic ones, may give some children an early advantage over the others, those children who start on basal readers not only catch up, but surpass the former group as both progress through the grades (13). Yet, we cannot ignore the fact that some children who start under either one method or the other fail to learn to read.

Research in methodology has led into the study of linguistics and psycholinguistics in the search for a possible connection between the acquisition of speech and the acquisition of the skills necessary for reading. However, in spite of the apparently logical and expected association between learning to speak and learning to read, little has been found to connect both learning processes, and the conclusions of one researcher exploring this avenue are negative in every respect (16).

One important point that research in the field has now fairly well established, but must be promulgated and expounded, is the value of the human element in the teaching situation. The most vital element in the struggle to teach reading successfully is the teacher. It is the teacher who must select, apply, bend, modify, and tailor the instructional approach to the individual needs of the child. He or she must purge himself or herself (sometimes a near impossibility) of preconceptions and attitudes towards the pupils, whose very success, or lack of it in later life, might well depend on these attitudes. Self-fulfilling prophecies of old, long-perpetuated myths such as the one about girls' innate superiority over boys when it comes to ability to learn to read crumble when teachers believe that *all* students have an equal chance, and are able to project to them this belief.

The success of any particular method of reading instruction is also dependent, to a great extent, on the teacher who employs it. It is the teacher's ability to adapt methods to individuals, to be creative

and ingenious that spells out the difference between failure and success in the results obtained.

How creative, however, does our ever-so-strictly-structured educational system allow our teachers to be? How flexible can a human be in using tools of instruction in an over-crowded classroom? How far can he or she deviate from the old norms of teaching—regardless of the effectiveness of the new approach—without encountering opposition from his or her superiors? And those of us in the business of preparing teachers-to-be, just how well do we do the job of creating—or selecting—superior teachers?

In a brilliant address delivered by Mrs. Helen M. Robinson before members of the International Reading Association in Anaheim, California, this very question of training and selection was discussed. Mrs. Robinson's implications are clear: we often emphasize knowledge of subject matter and methodology while we neglect the entire gamut of other qualities necessary for effective teaching, such as empathy with the children, diligence, creativity, and expectations for the students. Selection, encouragement of the best, then, should be our aim, a selection based on the mastery of the subject matter to be taught, and on the human qualities of the individuals who aspire to be teachers.

Even under master teachers, however, some children fail. And here is one of the unspoken tragedies of our ideal of mass education. The causes of failure are many and varied: physical, neurological, environmental, and socioeconomic. This last one is perhaps the most pathetic. Since we have come to accept reading to be *endowing the printed page with meaning*—rather than deriving meaning *from the printed page*, an environmentally disadvantaged or culturally disadvantaged child—notwithstanding the color of his skin or his ethnic background—stands little chance of making much progress in the mastery of this all important skill in an average classroom, since the range of experiences that he brings to the printed page is limited in comparison to that of his middle-class-or-better brothers and sisters.

Reading readiness programs, special reading clinics, ingenious parent-tutor individual help have given many of these children and their teachers some hope, and at times have brought about dramatic results. But the cost is high, the progress slow, and the population affected a mere fraction of the many in need of help. So, while we attack the problem here as well as on other fronts, our search for a more effective way to teach reading must continue. In the meantime, given the infinite variations in individuals' emotional, psychological, and physiological makeups, good teachers and an eclectic approach

to the teaching of beginning, continued, and remedial reading seem to be the answer . . . at least for the present.

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