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The Teaching of Reading in the United States

By Blanche O. Bush

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The history of the teaching of reading in the United States is directly related to the background influences of the period. The changing institutions, religious, political and economic, are reflected in the aims, materials and procedures of reading in each era. In this paper the history of the teaching of reading has been traced from the early colonial period to the present time.

Religious Emphasis During Colonial Period

During the colonial period (1607-1775) religion was the controlling force in the settler's life and was directly reflected in the instruction of reading and in the materials used in the schools. The early schools were of two types, private for the well-to-do, and charity for those who were unable to pay tuition. Both, however, were patterned after those in England with reading, writing, religion, and Latin making up the curriculum. (5)

Learning was mostly memory work and fear of punishment was the dominating factor in motivating the instructional process. Although rewards were also offered, they were generally in the form of the privilege of reading a chapter or two in the Bible. (2)

The hornbook and the New England Primer were the most important books used by the young child. The hornbook, which originated in England, was a single printed sheet pasted to a wooden paddle and covered with a sheet of horn. The New England Primer typically was about $3\frac{1}{4}$ by $4\frac{1}{2}$ inches in size and generally contained 88 pages written in rhyme. The subject matter which was related to Christian theology, Bible history and general information was of interest to adults, although it was written for children. As the primer continued to be used over the years the only revisions were those in religious views.

The mastering of the A B C's was of prime importance. This was expressed in the opening stanza of many of the early primers.

He who will neer learn his A B C's
Forever will a blockhead be. (4)

Typical procedures of the time were reported as follows:

After they have got some knowledge of their letters and a smattering of some syllables and words in the horn book, turn them into the A B C or Primer, and therein to make them name the letters and spell the words till by often use they can pronounce the shortest words at first sight. (7)

Having graduated from the primer, the child was permitted to read the Bible, resorting to the spelling out technique when reading new words. The method of teaching reading was of lesser importance than the subject matter.

Nationalistic-Political-Moralistic Emphasis

The second emphasis in reading instruction was the Nationalistic-Political-Moralistic approach which was popular during the years 1775 to 1840. The break with England and the establishment of our new country caused politics to replace religious motives in educational practices and materials.

The content of the reading matter was selected to purify the American language and unify the various dialects, to promote patriotism and loyalty to the new country, and to foster high political and moral behavior. (7)

The method of teaching during this period placed great stress on oral reading which resulted in the development of many patriotic orators. The emphasis was shifted to correct pronunciation and enunciation and attention was focused on the mechanics of reading and not on the meaning of the subject matter.

Emphasis on Promoting Intelligent Citizenship (1840-1880)

Reading instruction during this period increased the emphasis upon words and phonetics but eliminated syllabiums as an introduction to reading. (7)

The need for new methods of reading instruction was brought to light by Horace Mann, one of the outstanding educators of all times, in his well-known report to the board of education in Massachusetts in 1838 in which he criticized the alphabet method and suggested the

word method. Although Mann's word system was not the ideal method of teaching reading it was a definite step forward.

Oral reading and elocutionary delivery continued to be the main aims in reading instruction with the additional motives as noted by Alonzo Potter in the *American School Journal* for August, 1856: (7)

- 1stly, to acquire knowledge both for its own sake and its uses:
- 2ndly, to improve the intellectual powers:
- 3rdly, to refine taste:
- 4thly, to strengthen the moral and religious sentiments.

During this era the graded school system was brought into being and the natural development was a series of books in which each text was definitely planned for each of the various grades. McGuffey was the first author to develop a clearly defined and carefully graded series consisting of one reader for each of the six grades. He introduced real situations from the child's own experiences and omitted the religious, moralistic and adult content which had characterized previous readers. Although provision was made for repetition of new words it was of the "echo" type with short, choppy and most uninteresting sentences.

Josiah Bumstead and John Russell Webb, about 1840, were the first authors to definitely advocate the word system. The majority of teachers, however, continued to use the alphabet method because most of the textbooks available advocated it. Spelling and reading were closely tied together and an attempt was made to correlate writing with reading by having the children copy sentences that appeared in the primers. In the advanced readers, elocution continued to be stressed.

Emphasis on Reading as a Cultural Asset

The period from about 1870 to 1918 emphasized reading as a cultural asset. The aim of reading was to promote a permanent interest in literature. As usual, excesses crept into the instruction in the form of minute analysis of classics such as the study of archaic words in *Ivanhoe*.

Courses of Study in reading during this period replaced the meager outline which had been presented to the school boards and which had served as guides for teachers. The aims for teaching, representative of the period, were reported in a Course of Study published by the Flint School system as follows:

The purpose of the course is threefold: first, to teach children to read; second, to cause children to like to read; third, to enable them to know and prefer good literature. (7)

Many professional books came into prominence due to the new materials and methods which favored the consideration of literary quality and fitness of reading matter. *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, written by Edmund Burke Huey, was the first book to make a scientific contribution to reading instruction.

In the basal readers the outstanding changes were the omission of the elocution rules and the substitution of literary selections for moral and informational material. The cloth cover replaced cardboard covers and the type was larger and clearer. Supplemental reading material for the upper grades included classic literature and for the primary grades, Mother Goose Tales.

The methods used during this period in the primary grades were the sentence and story method and the elaborate phonetic system which stressed the practice of teaching sounds and combinations of letters. The practice of learning the alphabet and spelling the word was practically abandoned. The techniques used in the upper grades were summarized by George P. Brown, President of the Indiana Normal School (1880) as follows:

1. There are biographical, historical, geographical, scientific and literary allusions in nearly every piece which must be studied, discussed, and understood before the selection can be read intelligently.
2. Words of peculiar orthography and pronunciation must be learned.
3. Words and phrases having a special meaning in the lesson should be defined in language of the pupil. Mere dictionary synonyms will not serve. This must be done before the pupil is prepared to read at all.
4. Before the piece is finally left the pupil should be required to write a paraphrase of certain portions or all of it, expressing the thoughts in his own language, and then his style of composition compared with the author's and its defects noted.
5. If the selection is a gem worthy to be remembered, it should be committed to memory. A large store of classic pieces thus fixed in memory are valuable for the grandeur of the thoughts, for their excellence of style, and for the increased vocabulary they give. (7)

The elaborate phonetic method resulted from complaints made

by some educators that many children in the upper grades who had been taught by the word method were not able to read well. Several well known phonetic systems were introduced at this time by such authors as Ward, Pollard, Beacon and Gordon which were formal, uninteresting and more difficult than the old alphabet-spelling approach.

The earliest crusader for the sentence and story methods was George L. Farnan. Following his publication of the manual, *The Sentence Method*, several well known reading texts appeared based on his theory. *Stepping Stones to Literature* (1897) and *Graded Literature Series* (1899) were among the earlier publications. Between 1909 and 1918 this method reached the height of its popularity. Some of the more familiar series were *Language Readers*, *The Progressive Road to Reading*, *Story Hour Readers*, *The Merrill Readers*, *The Horace Mann Readers*, *Everyday Classics*, and the *Elson Readers*. William H. Elson, author of the *Elson Readers*, commented, "Interesting material is the most important factor in learning to read and schools should provide children an opportunity to develop a broader reading program covering all of the cultural areas." (7)

The "look and say" method was an outgrowth of the failure of the complete phonetic approach and resulted in an over emphasis of a method which had no rules to be followed. The child learned each word by looking at it and then saying it. If a difference or similarity was noted, it was incidental.

Emphasis Upon Silent Reading

Between 1918 and 1925 the tendency to go to extremes evidenced itself again. Oral reading which had been the accepted classroom method was displaced by silent reading. The concept of silent reading was perhaps the most revolutionary since the beginning of reading instruction. Among the components which may have had a bearing on the silent reading emphasis were the results of the Army Alpha Tests given during World War I which showed that the silent reading ability of the men was very inferior. As these data were studied many factors were blamed, including oral-word calling, unsuitable and too difficult literary materials, and mechanical drills. Although interest was aroused in silent reading it took the efforts of Colonel Francis W. Parker to get the educators to take action, and soon the aim that

overshadowed all others was the teaching of efficient silent reading in order to meet the practical needs of the reader. (7)

Professional books published during this period placed great emphasis upon silent reading. Representative of one area of professional books was *One Hundred Ways of Teaching Silent Reading* written by Nila B. Smith which considered various procedures for developing different types of silent reading ability. (8)

As an outgrowth of scientific investigations in reading, several monographs were published by the University of Chicago which had a deep effect upon teaching methods. Objective evidence was presented which showed the difference between the processes of silent and oral reading, and also the effect on reading habits resulting from changes in content and the purposes of reading.

Courses of study reflected the silent reading emphasis and teachers' manuals became popular because of the unfamiliar silent reading techniques. Over reliance on the manual by some instructors sometimes clouded their procedures to the extent that individual differences were not considered.

Supplemental materials were used more widely and the subject matter tended to be factual or skill-drill type. Individualized reading had its introduction at this time but was related to content only. The development or comprehension and speed were of major concern. Phonics were introduced during the first three or four weeks of reading and continued throughout the primary grades. A few educators advocated silent reading exclusively while some discarded phonics, but these educators were in the minority.

Emphasis on Scientific Approach

About 1925 the effects of the scientific movement became evident in reading instruction. Studies revealed three significant procedures that were influenced by information secured through the expanded testing program; namely, the continuance of silent reading, the recognition of individual differences and the introduction of remedial reading on a broader scale.

As silent reading methods spread, textbooks for silent reading procedures were introduced and teachers began checking their pupils for comprehension. As the extreme emphasis on silent reading started to be balanced with other factors, investigators began to recognize

some uses of oral reading and broadened objectives were reflected in the courses of study and professional books.

As newly developed tests were administered more widely, the basic truth that there were wide individual differences in reading achievement of children in the same grade and group became evident. This spurred educators to experiment with a variety of classroom organizations and instructional methods that would provide ways of coping with this variation in learning rate of children. (9)

Interest in reading readiness reached its peak during the decade between 1930 and 1940, with 22 studies reported by Gray in his annual summary of investigations and studies. The number of studies has steadily increased since then and reading readiness is now generally recognized and accepted as a basic and important factor in reading. (6)

Between 1930 and 1950, the activity movement was at its height. Children were allowed to work freely, spontaneously, and actively in following their own interests. The subject matter in all areas was presented through units of work. This provided an impetus for bringing more books into the classroom so that the pupils could read in all areas while working on their unit.

Another trend during this era was the focusing of attention on high school, college, and adult reading with emphasis on levels of interests and uses of reading rather than on achievement and method.

During the decade, 1940-1950, greater emphasis on remedial reading was evidenced and the personal factors affecting reading such as interests, attitudes, social status, environmental climate, emotional and mental maturity and mental content were recognized as important factors in reading growth.

From 1950 to 1960 universal interest in the process of reading by teachers of all subjects and on all levels was indicated. For the first time reading instruction was questioned and severely criticized by parents and laymen. This forced educators to defend the methods of teaching of reading through articles, discussions, speeches and investigations. As a result of these criticisms, educators re-examined their methods of teaching reading, parents and laymen took a more active interest in reading instruction, and educators were provided an opportunity to explain the current research in the psychological and sociological approaches to reading instruction which are the basis for today's methods.

Changing Concepts of Reading

The expansion of knowledge and the emergence of a world culture have placed more pressure upon children to learn more extensively and thoroughly. This has resulted in new emphasis in reading instruction which is centered around the needs, interests and abilities of the individual.

Today, educators advocate a more balanced reading program with no one type of instruction given excessive emphasis. Educators realize the need for an eclectic approach which allows the best features of all procedures to be used.

Today, reading is considered a developmental process closely related to thinking and learning. It is a communicative skill that can be developed and expanded throughout life. Learning to read can not be isolated from the environmental, physical and psychological factors nor from the influences of the personality, ability and knowledge of the teacher. (3)

With emphasis on the individual, more knowledge about each reader is necessary and all avenues that provide information must be utilized, such as teacher observation, objective measures, informal inventories, interviews and social histories.

A concern regarding the effects of mass communication media, such as television, radio, movies and comics, concurrent with the recognition of reading deficiencies in large numbers at the high school and college levels have provided another impetus to research. Among the studies which have had a great impact on educators is the Carnegie-Harvard Study concerning teacher preparation. From this study twenty-two recommendations have been made relative to improving teacher preparation and in-training services. (1)

Teaching machines, which are still used on experimental basis, television, which is being introduced more widely each year, and tape recordings, which are just coming into their own, along with unlimited materials are providing educators with many new aids in the area of reading. The problem today is not availability but the selection of materials which best fit the ability, needs and interest level of the individual.

Summary

In tracing the history of the teaching of reading, the background

influences of each period have been reflected in the aims, materials and procedures in reading. The aims, which were narrow, and the curriculums, which were limited in the past, are now broader and better integrated, and materials are in abundance. Today, the well balanced teaching of reading program is eclectic and aims to guide the student in the use of skills, abilities, attitudes and information so that he may become a well-rounded individual.

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