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Teaching Reading: A History

by Robert McCole Wilson

Introduction

Not to know what happened before one was born is always to be a child.
—*Marcus Tullius Cicero*

This paper was first written in the 1970s in an attempt to clarify the ongoing debate about the best method of teaching reading. While I am not a reading specialist, I do have some knowledge of the history of education and I knew that this debate was not new. I hoped that an historical view would assist those in the debate to be clearer and more accurate in their arguments. It has been updated but the substance has not changed. It should also be noted that the work suffers from the inaccuracy that inevitably comes with such a brief overview of a large topic.

What is Reading?

Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.
—*Ecclesiastes 12:12*

One of the problems encountered when discussing this topic is what does it mean when we say a person can read? At first sight it means that someone can recognize marks and translate them into spoken words. But usually what is meant is that the person understands what he or she reads, or is "functionally literate." Beyond the recognition of the letters and words is the knowledge and understanding that the reader must bring to the written words to be able to make sense of them. The same adolescent who has difficulty in reading a school history text may have no similar difficulty in deciphering the complex information in a car repair manual whereas the history teacher may not understand the car manual. In similar ways these days we hear about "computer literacy" and "media literacy," phrases that do not take on meaning until they are used in context.

Some definitions of literacy are so all-encompassing that they include almost everything that is taught in schools. The differences in evaluating the effectiveness of methods of teaching reading are often the result of lack of agreement on what is trying to be achieved. Tests of

reading ability are far more than deciphering and understanding of letters and words.

Another complication is the terminology used by the supporters of the many different methods and sub-methods advocated. Often the same name is given to different systems, and similar systems are given different names. But this multitude can be reduced to two for teaching basic literacy which, in this paper, will be called "phonics" and "whole word." "Phonics" (code-emphasis) requires the letters and combination of letters to be learned first, and then combined to form the word. "Whole word" (meaning-emphasis) has the child first learn to recognize and understand the complete word or group of words in context.

Origins

> It is better that the grammarians should chide us than that the people should not understand us.
>
> —*St. Augustine*

Writing, and therefore reading, came as an aid and a necessity to early civilizations when food surpluses allowed specialization, and commerce developed to the extent that regulation was needed to avoid chaos. Many different types were developed: pictures, signs, tallies, numbers, shorthand. Because hieroglyphic and pictogram writing necessitated the memorization of hundreds, even thousands, of different characters, those that mastered them became a powerful specialist elite who had spent from childhood to adulthood learning them. There is, however, an advantage of a pictograph writing in that it is not dependent on a spoken language; a person literate in it can communicate with the speaker of another language who is also literate in it.

The alphabet first appeared as a syllabary; by the time it was adopted by the Greeks about 2,500 years ago we have, with the addition of letters for vowels, the beginning of the modern Western alphabet. While pictographs represent objects, sometimes ideas, alphabetic letters represent sounds. Today we still recognize the almost universal pictographs on road signs and rest rooms no matter what language we speak, or even if we are illiterate in our own language. Bbut we need to understand the language to be able to understand information in an alphabetic language even if we recognize the letters.

In a sense, the methods of teaching reading and writing parallel the two types of writing: one is the rote memory of a whole word or phrase, hundreds and even thousands of them; the other is the memorization of a comparatively few (26 in English) letters in their various forms, numbers and symbols in mathematics, a few pictographs such as "&", and punctuation. The basics can be learned in a few months or years and once learned, unfamiliar words can be sounded out.

While not central to this work, it is worth mentioning that some experts maintain that the form of a written language, and how and when it is learned, have a significant effect on the way a person thinks, even on brain development in childhood. And while abstraction is easier in an alphabetical language, it is possible to know a word without knowing its meaning.

It can be argued, though not proved, that because the Greeks were first to have a fully developed alphabet, they laid the foundations of Western philosophical thought. It can also be argued, and even harder to prove, that it was the ease of gaining literacy that led to Ancient Greece having the first large literate population which in turn allowed for the development of a democracy.

For the Greek and Roman leadership, reading was incidental to the real education of rhetoric, physical fitness and codes of conduct, and there is evidence that the Celts regarded the ability as unmanly. It was with the rise of Christianity and the importance of studying religious works that it became central to studies.

A problem that was to be significant for modern languages has its origin in the second-hand adoption, through the Tuscans, of the Greek alphabet by the Romans in the naming of the letters. The names the Greeks had for their letters were clearly distinct from their sounds; the Roman letter names were derived from the sounds. In English, while "e" may sometimes be the same as in "be," at no time is "aitch" a sound in a word. One of the steps that had to be taken in the advancement of reading pedagogy was to recognize this problem.

Ancient Greek and Latin were almost completely phonetically written. Since much teaching of reading and writing was in the hands of slaves or barely literate poorer people trying to earn a few coins, and there was no methodology of instruction, it is likely that teaching reading and writing varied. We do, however, have a few hints that the usual method was "alphabetic"; that is, letters were learned first along with their sounds, then were combined into syllables and into words. Plato mentions:

> Just as in learning to read, I said, we were satisfied when we knew the letters of the alphabet, which are very few, in all their recurring sizes and combinations; not slighting them as unimportant whether they occupy a space large or small, but everywhere eager to make them out; and not thinking ourselves perfect in the art of reading until we recognize them wherever they are found. (*The Republic*)

Dionysius of Helicarnassus, a Greek who lived in Rome during the first century B.C., described it thus:

> When we first learned to read was is it not necessary at first to know the names of the letters, their shapes, their value in syllables, their differences, then the words and their case, their quantity long or short, their accent, and the rest?

> Arrived at this point we began to read and write, slowly at first and syllable by syllable. Some time afterwards, the forms being sufficiently engraved on our memory, we read more cursorily, in the elementary book, then all sorts of books, finally with incredible quickness and without making any mistake.

Rome's foremost writer on educational practice, Quintilian (35-95 A.D.?), describes this method at the beginning of *Institutes of Oratory*. "It will be best for children, therefore, to be taught the appearances of the letters at once." (I, 1, 25. J. S. Watson's translation, 1856). While he also emphasized the interaction of reading, writing, and speaking, it is clear in Book X that he viewed reading and writing as supports for speaking (because the art of rhetoric was so important in the public life of the empire).

With the rediscovery of the complete text of the *Institutes* in 1416, his prestige and influence were renewed. From Erasmus, Luther, and Melanchthon down to Milton and Pope and into the 19th century, writers cited him. Although it was his exposition on form and content, his rhetoric, that interested them, they could not avoid his comments on the methods of teaching reading and writing. His recommendation for copying, not only of letters, but also of the texts of great works was an integral part of learning up until about a hundred years ago but now seems to have disappeared.

This seems to have been the common method of reading instruction from Classical times through the Middle Ages when a prime purpose of schools was to learn to read Latin. Much of the writing instruction was not so much aimed at personal literacy as at copying texts. There is some indication that, during the Middle Ages, reading and writing were seen as separate skills to be taught separately. Some leaders, such as King Alfred of England, could read but

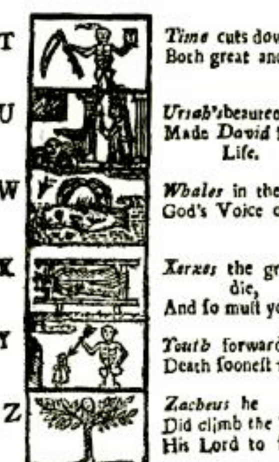
not write and some scribes appear to have been limited to copying.

Oral reading was usual. St. Augustine, for instance, was perplexed by St. Ambrose's habit of silent reading (in *Confessions*). The importance placed on it can still be seen by observing the lip movement of some religious people when they are reading their scriptures. It was only after the invention of the printing press made mass production of books possible, that silent reading became usual, but the recognition and teaching of it as a special skill had to wait until the 20th century.

Early Modern Europe

> Reading maketh a full man; conference a ready man; and writing an exact man. And therefore, if a man write little, he had need have a great memory; if he confer little, he had need have a present wit: and if he read little, he had need have much cunning,to seem to know, that he doth not.
>
> —*Francis Bacon*, *Of Studies*

With the Reformation came a demand for reading the vernacular by the many not just Latin by the few. First Luther in Germany, then the Calvinists, asserted that each person should be able to read and study the scriptures as a means to personal salvation. The Bible was translated and a new invention, the printing press, meant books were available to many more people. In England, the monarchy wanted the boys "to read English intelligently instead of Latin unintelligently."



Now the Child being entred in his Letters and Spelling, let him learn theſe and ſuch like Sentences by Heart, whereby he will be both inſtructed in his Duty, and encouraged in his Learning.

The Dutiful Child's Promiſes,

I Will fear GOD,and honour the KING.
I will honour my Father & Mother.
I will Obey my Superiours.
I will Submit to my Elders,
I will Love my Friends.
I will hate no Man.
I will forgive my Enemies, and pray to God for them.
I will as much as in me lies keep all God's Holy Commandments.

Borrowings from other languages, particularly French, Latin and Greek, were already making English a rich and diversified language, but the accommodation of these words meant that its spelling was so diversified, reading it became far more than deciphering a one-to-one correspondence between letters and sounds. This situation became aggravated over time by changes in pronunciation and the many dialects that have to be accommodated, so that spellings have become less and less indicators of sounds.

Because Latin letters were used for a language which was ill-suited to their pronunciation, the adaptation led to a mish-mash of spellings that took several hundred years to standardize. This occurred after the reign of James I largely as a result of the publication of the Authorised Version of the Bible in 1611. No longer could someone just learn the basic letters and translate them into the sounds of words. The same letter or letters could have different

sounds and one sound could be represented by different letters. The method of teaching these many variations later came to be called the "phonics" system which is really an elaboration of the alphabetical system used by the ancients.

Most people who commented on teaching methods simply assumed that this was the way that reading and writing would be taught. Mulcaster, one of the earliest English educational theorists, saw learning to read as learning the alphabet:

> For the letter is the first and simplest impression in the trade of teaching, and nothing before it. The knitting and jointing wherof groweth on verie infinitely, as it appeareth most plainely by daily spelling, and continuall reading, till partely by use, and partely by argument, the child get the habit, and cunning to read well, which being once goten, what a cluster of commodities doth it bring with all? (*The Training Up of Children,* 1581)

A century later, John Locke, an advocate of non-coercive but rational instruction, also equated learning to read with learning the letters though he recognized the need to make that learning more interesting:

> 148. [...] But then, as I said before, it must never be imposed as a task, nor made a trouble to them. There may be dice and play-things, with the letters on them, to teach children the alphabet by playing; and twenty other ways may be found, suitable to their particular tempers, to make this kind of learning a sport to them.
>
> 149. Thus children may be cozened into a knowledge the letters; be taught to read without perceiving it to be anything but a sport, and play themselves into that others are whipped for. (See sections 148-159, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, 1693)

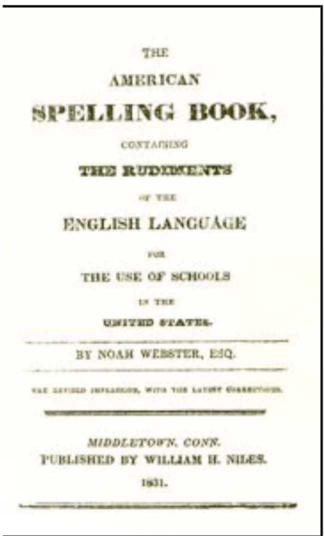
While a few people, such as Sir Thomas Smith (1568) and John Hart (1570) understood the problem could be alleviated by a truly English alphabet (for Smith 34 letters after redundant ones had been eliminated), teachers were bewildered or angered when their pupils who had clearly learned their letters could not read. Some tried to alleviate the dull and exhausting work of learning letters and syllables by using games, others felt more of the same would improve reading and spelling. A supplementary problem was that the idea of readiness for learning was not yet accepted. We read of children as young as three being forced into long recitations of their letters in many combinations.

The grandfather of modern educational methodology was Comenius with his emphasis, among other things, on following the order of nature and appealing through the senses. The former led to instruction being graded from easy to difficult and selected for utility, and the latter to well-illustrated textbooks, beginning with *Orbis Sensualium Pictus* in 1658, covering many topics. While he clearly used the ABC method, his work shows an understanding of the need to relate words to the real world. It is understandable that others would later use his work to support whole-word methods. Although his theories were ignored, his school books were used in homes as well as schools for over a hundred years in their many translations.

Along with the Bible, the Catechism and other religious texts, there were books designed specifically for reading such as the Horn Book, primers and spelling books. The Horn Book, sometimes with its content in a Christ cross (criss-cross), would be better described as an alphabet memory board. (For more information about hornbooks, see Hornbooks at the Blackwell History of Education Research Museum at Northern Illinois University

website.)

The popularity of the *New England Primer*, 1690, lasted for over a hundred years in the American Colonies. Their content was religious instruction combined with learning to read the alphabet, syllables and words.


THE
AMERICAN
SPELLING BOOK,
CONTAINING
THE RUDIMENTS
OF THE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE
FOR
THE USE OF SCHOOLS
IN THE
UNITED STATES.

BY NOAH WEBSTER, ESQ.

THE REVISED IMPRESSION, WITH THE LATEST CORRECTIONS.

MIDDLETOWN, CONN.
PUBLISHED BY WILLIAM H. NILES.
1831.

Click here for a lesson from Webster.

A number of "spellers" began to replace the Primers, the most famous being the more secular Noah Webster's *American Spelling Book* (1783) which, in its hundred years of use, sometimes sold more than a million copies a year. The words were grouped into graded lists, it had a series of graded reading lessons, and there were some illustrations. These were all designed for the phonics method of teaching.
William Holmes McGuffey (1800 -1873) brought out the first of his six graded readers in 1835 based on spelling principles, though their huge popularity depended on the moral and inspirational stories and the wide variety of topics and practical matters in them. His readers and spelling book were to reach an estimated 125 million in sales over the next half century.
In Great Britain, similar books were used such as Dilworth's *New Guide to the English Tongue*, a speller with word lists, their pronunciation, grammar rules, and moral guides.

SUGGESTIONS TO TEACHERS.

Click here to see teacher suggestions from the first *McGuffey Reader*, 1879 edition.

Click here to see the *Reader's* preface.

There was still no necessary connection between reading and writing. In Boston in 1789, for example, three reading schools were established and three writing schools. Handwriting was an important subject in schools and much time was devoted to it; many a child had his knuckles rapped for holding his writing instrument incorrectly as he wrote on his slate. The

art of the "scrivener" was often taught separately until the need for this skill gradually disappeared after the invention and widespread use of the typewriter.

From Meaning to Reading

> Should you not think it better to learn to spell, than to be laughed at for blunders?
> —*McGuffey's New Fourth Eclectic Reader*

The first person that we know of who tried to reverse the process of learning to read was Ickelsamer, a German, whose language had suffered similar problems by adopting the Roman alphabet. In contrast to the accepted belief of the time, he felt that speech sounds were primary and letters secondary and he ignored the conventional names for letters. In his primer *The Shortest Way to Reading,* 1527, he had his pupils learn the individual sounds of speech first and only after they knew them, would they name the letters. But this was only a small step, and in any case, others were not ready for change.

It was the attitude that came with the Enlightenment and particularly the ideas of Rousseau that produced a society receptive to a real change. If the child was not learning, it was because Nature's way was not being followed: teachers were placing the subject first and not the child. From now on, those whose teaching methods used the child as a receptacle into which knowledge was pushed would be on the defensive.

By the second quarter of the 19th century, the need and desire for change had become so extensive that only a few of the new methods will be mentioned. To give credit fairly is like trying to say who invented television or the light bulb: the groundwork had been laid and so many were working together or independently on innovation that only a few better known and representative people will be mentioned.

The first person who was prominent in advocating the "natural" way of learning to read was the German, Friedrich Gedike (1754-1803). He felt the rote learning of meaningless letters led to slow pronunciation of uncomprehended words. The child should listen to songs and stories suited to his age, draw pictures, and exercise his imagination. By the time he was about ten he would learn to read easily by going from "wholes" to their parts, from books to their elements, words then letters.

Critics were quick to say that the system led to the child confusing words for a long time and not learning to spell; although his primer went through three editions, it had no lasting effect.

Shortly after, Ernst Trall advocated labelling common objects with words and giving children similar labels to match to them. After the child had learned sufficient words, he would move to a primer with those words plus others (*the, and, do*, etc.) to fill in sentences. Wackernagel introduced a primer for mothers to read with their children following. The child would gradually familiarize himself with the pages, words, then letters. Neither of these ever gained popularity in schools, possibly because of the difficulty of using them with large classes.

An important influence on teaching the "wholeness" of words was the Frenchman, Jean Jacotot (1790-1840), who developed his method when, as a teacher of Dutch students, they did not know each others' languages. He found through repetitious memorizing of long passages in French, the students showed remarkable ability in learning it. From this he developed the theory of learning the "wholeness" of a book then breaking it into successively smaller units until the letters were learned. German teachers followed this up but with sentences as the "whole."

It was during his visit to Germany in 1843 that the influential American educator, Horace Mann (1796-1859), saw this method in practice, and it was he who gave it great publicity when he returned to the United States. He apparently did not know that a similar method was already in use in such places as Boston and New York State, possibly brought there by German immigrants.

At the same time a hybrid method was developing, the learning of letters through the repetition of the same letter in a number of words until the child became familiar with its sight, sound, and use. Essential to this was the avoidance of the isolated learning of letters and meaningless syllables. It was really this method that Mann enthusiastically endorsed.

A clearer advocate of the "whole-word" method was John Keagy (1792-1837) who proposed a miniature museum of articles whose names children would learn and only after they knew the words for them (as he said, somewhat like Chinese symbols), would they learn their letters and spelling. In 1840, John Bumstead of Boston brought out *My Little Primer* based on this method.

At about the same time, Reverend Thomas Gallaudet (1787-1851), in his efforts to teach the deaf, was developing the method of having students learn their letters by means of words. After a number of words had been learned through relating them to pictures and objects, letters were learned from these words. In 1836, some primary teachers in Boston sought and gained permission to use this method in their classes.

These, of course, are only some of the innovations that we know of, and there were no doubt many others that were not recorded.

In his lectures and reports beginning in 1841, Mann attacked the alphabetic and syllabic methods of teaching reading as meaningless repetition of "skeleton-shaped ghosts." He pointed out, for example, that *l- e- g,* does not spell "leg" but "elegy." After his report as Secretary to the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1844 attacked what he had seen in the schools, a group of grammar school masters attacked his method in return as requiring the learning of hundreds, even thousands of words, before students begin to learn to spell. While they (as secondary school teachers) did not teach reading, they did have a close knowledge of what was being done, and they complained that the failure to have a clear system led to the "evil" of poor spelling. Their complaints reveal that a number of different methods were being used, some beginning with the alphabet, others using words with the same letters, still others requiring words to be learned without learning the letters.

In challenging Mann, Samual Greene of Philips School found the following weaknesses: letters have to be learned eventually; English loses its advantages over such languages as Chinese; learning just words does not lead to mastering other words; spelling is made more difficult, particularly as the child advances. He objected to the idea of making things too easy and simple for the child: while it is important that the child be happy, it is more important to lay a firm and permanent foundation.

Another individual, writing under the pseudonym of "Q," objected to the criticism that children found the learning of their letters arduous. Many, in fact, learned them from their mothers before they started school. The problem, he said, was that in large classes, the pupils were receiving only a small amount of individual attention. Q challenged the concept that it was as natural for a child to learn to read as it was to learn to talk. This shows that the analogy of the naturalness of learning to read and learning to talk was now being used.

Click here to view a page from the first *McGuffy Reader.*

This early skirmish in the "reading wars" appears to have been characterized on both sides by lack of knowledge and by misrepresentation. One can't help but feel that this conflict had as much to do with resentment by practicing teachers over what they saw as unwarranted interference by a central authority. While Mann was effective in bringing attention to the barrenness of much of the teaching, any immediate effect on the teaching of reading is in doubt, but the prestige of his name was later used for support by advocates of the whole-word method.

So, what was really going on in the classrooms by the middle of the nineteenth century? Many were still using the old "ABC" method judging by the number of spellers. Some estimates show that Webster's *The American Spelling Book* had sold close to a hundred million copies by the end of the century. A few were using the whole-word method. More and more teachers were using some form of the "new method" or "word method" whereby some words were taught first as a means of teaching letters. This varied from about fifteen, to less than a hundred in Mann's case, to 150 to 200 later recommended by Colonel Parker. Shortly after this, the name "phonics" began to be applied to the learning of the sounds of letters and their combinations, as opposed to the names of the letters.

We should be careful not to judge what was happening in schools by what was being taught in the expanding number of normal schools and teachers' colleges. In the classrooms, the teacher, still unlikely to be formally trained, was using how she herself had been taught, what she had picked up from her colleagues, or whatever methods she found most comfortable. Classroom readers designed for one method could be adapted to another so that the presence of any type does not indicate that the associated method was being used. Although they were designed for a phonics system, the *McGuffey Readers* were adaptable to other methods. Important then, but not now, in the teaching of what is came to be called "language arts" were elocution and recitation, and schoolbooks had passages for the students to learn for public performance.

Click here for another lesson from the first *McGuffy Reader.*

Teaching by an alphabetic system was also to be resurrected. In England, Sir Isaac Pitman (1813-1897) developed a phonetic alphabet of 42 letters for English and he and his supporters used it to teach reading in some English and Scottish schools. Great claims were made for the speed with which children learned to read it, and that they had no problems transferring to the regular alphabet. Its success led to a similar system in the United States, the Leigh system.

Why these methods did not last though they were highly acclaimed is hard to say. It may have been on one hand that phonics was too entrenched to be supplanted at this time, and on the other hand those pushing for change were supporting the word method. The need for special readers and their cost may have played a part. Another advance worth mentioning is the suggestion made by Farnham in 1881 that oral reading and silent reading are different skills. In advocating his "whole sentence" method, he said that children should be taught to

take in the meaning directly from the printed page because the practice of pronouncing the words out loud or to themselves made silent reading a slow and laborious process.

All this was happening against the background of general acceptance by governments in Western Europe and its offshoots that literacy of the general population was essential for a developed society, that it should be compulsory and state supported. In democracies, it was realized that it was necessary for their functioning. Schools as places for the indoctrination of religious and moral precepts were beginning to give way to their being vehicles for the development of attitudes and responsibilities of citizens and this concept was to expand to include the idea of full personal development. After the passing of the 1867 Reform Act (expanding the franchise), the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Robert Lowe, remarked, "I believe it will be absolutely necessary that you should prevail on our future masters to learn their letters."

This echoed what James Adams had said early in the history of the United States: "The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and must be willing to bear the expense of it." As was realized in Germany, no matter what the political system was, trade and commerce needed people who could read and write. "The Prussian schoolmaster won the battle of Sadowa." (von Moltke)

While the developments and disagreements that had begun in the first half of the 19th century were to continue and expand, the second half brought few changes in the theory of teaching. From comments made by visitors to schools, the methods that had been in use were much the same. Public school conditions were harsh and crowded and the lessons rigid. But this was the time when basic education became almost universal in English-speaking countries. Industrialization and urbanization along with the huge migrations into the United States and the British colonies added to the natural population increases. A tremendous task was undertaken and had great success.

By the end of the century, literacy was the rule rather than the exception. In Britain, in contrast to an estimated 30% at the beginning of the century, a literacy rate of over 90% was being claimed by the end, with concerns that some itinerants such as barge and gypsy children were not being reached. In the United States, the 1900 census showed that illiteracy varied from 2.3% in Nebraska to 38.5% in Louisiana; these compared with a claimed 1% in Prussia and an estimated 79% in Imperial Russia. Care should be taken in accepting these figures at face value, however. No clear definition of how these figures were obtained or what the criteria were for judgement is given and standardized testing was not yet in use.

New Education, New Methods?

> Education [...] has produced a vast population able to read, but unable to distinguish what is worth reading.
>
> —*G. M. Trevelyan*, English Social History

The next important movement for change centred at the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago and the work supported by President Harper, Colonel Parker and John Dewey (a student of Hall). From here their "Progressive Education" was to be spread widely, at least its theory

Much of the work was supported by G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924) who had examined extensively the teaching of reading in such places as Germany where he had studied philosophy. Sometimes described as America's first psychologist, Hall argued that the stages of individual growth recapitulated those of social evolution and therefore the distinctive character of childhood must be respected. He believed that there was a critical period between five and eight when the child had both the "interest and capacity" to learn to read. If forced upon the learner before this it will have long-term negative effects, and if missed the

learner will later have difficulties and disadvantages. This concept was to be echoed in R. J. Havighurst's "developmental tasks" in the 1950s.

First in 1886 Hall issued a pamphlet, and in 1911 a book, in which he advocated the word method. He also downplayed the importance of reading. Many great and wise men and women had not been able to read. He even used the legend of Thamus from Plato's *Phaedrus* to show that it could be a disadvantage.

Click here to see two pages of a 1923 primer.

Hall's ideas fitted in well with the progressive movement. Reading was not to be the centre of the child's education. The pleasure in learning to live was paramount and he or she would come naturally to learn to read along with other natural development. Education was to be a practical, hands-on activity rather than text-book study. It was at the end of Dewey's "play period" from four to eight years that the child would be introduced to reading and writing as part of other activities.

This emphasis placed on the incorporation of language learning -- reading, writing and spelling -- into the whole learning process was to be accepted widely. The teacher's task was to understand the child in order to meet the needs as they arose. Progressive movement advocates observed (so they believed) that the child comes naturally to words in a way he does not to letters, so the whole-word method was appropriate. Teachers were not alone in believing this; many parents joined them. Important contributions were their support for pre-reading activities and readiness for learning to read. But what some called "progressive" others criticized as "permissive" even "indulgent." [I acknowledge that I may have misrepresented or misinterpreted "Progressive Education." Many hours and pages have been spent by others in arguing just what it was.]

It was during this period that the child-rearing experts, usually physicians and later to include psychologists, replaced the grandmothers, unmarried aunts and clergymen in giving advice to parents on how to raise children. Dr Spock is only one in a long line of experts who influenced the way young children should be treated both at home and in school. The influence of the Italian physician, Maria Montessori (1870-1952), is still felt today. She advocated enabling children to learn through the senses until they reached a mental level appropriate to passing on to reading and writing.

In the first years of the 20th century, then, there were names for the many methods of teaching reading: alphabetic, phonetic, phonic, look-and-say, word, sentence, each with its own supporters and its own variety of uses. But some teachers were realizing that something was more important than the method. Flora J. Cooke, a graduate of the Chicago Laboratory School, said in 1900, "They must first desire to read; after the desire is awakened the child will learn by any method, with or without a school. He will find a teacher." (in *Course of Study*)

In the next fifty years, many papers and books were produced on the teaching of reading, too many perhaps. Some were in defence of a particular method, others attacking what was seen as a disturbing lack of achievement. A few took a closer look at what the mechanics of reading are and others tried to relate learning to the psychology of the process of learning to read. While gestalt psychology seemed to support the "wholeness" of reading, advances in

linguistics could be used to support either approach. Developments in the production of standardized testing assisted in making better statistical comparisons. Much was said, but little that had not been said before.

Click here to see two pages of a 1934 primer.

Side skirmishes involved the frequency of English words and the degree to which English is spelled phonetically. One study showed that three thousand words comprise ninety-eight percent of those used by adults as well as children -- support for the word method. Others showed that English spelling was not as illogical as had been claimed; that its frequent inconsistencies often aided meaning, and context aided comprehension -- support for the phonics method. After 1900, studies of eye-movement helped distinguish between the physical actions of oral and silent reading

The beginning readers that were used in most schools after the 1920s were usually based on the word or "look-and-say" method with, in North America, "Dick," "Jane" and "Spot" becoming household names along with the characters in the Dr. Seuss books. Some phonics were also, though not necessarily, taught, depending on the school and classroom teacher. An examination of word-based beginning readers that were supposedly based on reading for meaning, however, shows a remarkable lack of substance. The child could find working with these as unattractive and boring as the meaningless repetition of letters.

One theme that was to be repeated was "functional literacy." The tests given to American recruits during World War I showed that about 25% were unable to read and write well enough to perform simple tasks assigned to them. Time and again, the newly formulated standardized tests showed such things as, for example, a certain percentage of eighth-grade students could only read at a grade three level. Secondary or high school teachers regularly criticized primary and elementary teachers for the low level of language skills of the students they received and the colleges and universities in turn deplored the reading level of the their incoming students. All too often, failure to develop language skills was blamed on teaching methods rather than on the overall learning conditions of class size, physical plant, resources available, or the home and social background; and many teachers were not very well educated themselves.

Click here to see two pages of a 1941 primer.

After World war II, criticism of the large proportion of functionally illiterate, estimated at one third to one half of adults, grew until it reached its peak in the United states with the publication of Rudolf Flesch's *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955. While many educators defended the system by saying the aims of education were far more than teaching the "three

R's," public alarm grew. Those outside the esoteric walls of educational theory saw the ability to read and write as absolutely fundamental to education. Their target was the word method; to them "look-and-say" was "look-and-guess" (as opposed to "drill-and-kill"). According to critics, because word attack skills were not being taught, children were handicapped in deciphering new words and could not handle further education.

In the 1960s, the number of studies on the teaching of reading numbered in the thousands. Some accounted for the high adult illiteracy by lack of practice. They had been able to read, but in work and everyday life they read little; because they didn't use it, they lost it. Of those studies directed at comparing the different methods, the majority supported some sort of phonics approach. But many studies need to be viewed with caution as they were limited in approach and some may even have been distorted by vested interests such as academics with a relationship to a publishing company.

One solution was to rewrite books using a limited graded vocabulary, first of, for example, 700 words, then 3000, then 7000. Another was to teach words and letters simultaneously, a "new" method that had been used in the 19th century. Some reading texts began by using at the beginning only words that are spelled phonetically, then progressing to more complicated phonics and exceptions. The most common was to again teach phonics directly.

Click here to see two pages of a c. 1950 primer.

In the United Kingdom at the beginning of World war II, much the same thing was discovered as in the U.S.A.: over 25% of recruits were functional illiterates. As the cause was seen by many as the non-phonetic nature of much of the English language, a new call for spelling reform went out. Among other solutions, Sir James Pitman, grandson of Sir Isaac, and his followers prepared what was to be called the Initial Teaching Alphabet or *i.t.a.* of 45 letters, to be first used in 1961. Again great claims were made for its effectiveness and that no problems were encountered in transferring to normal spelling. It was, for a while, used in places both in the U.K and North America.

The most common prescription was to go back to some sort of phonics method and commercial publishers were quick to respond with their own special solutions. Experts were called upon to develop programmes and many new names were given to old ideas in different covers. Most major publishers of school texts put out developmental readers and supplementary texts. One popular programme was DISTAR (Direct Instructional System for Teaching and Remediation) which incorporated intense, systematic phonics instruction, teacher directed, with constant teacher-student interaction.

Salesmanship to school boards and administrators was as important as the quality of the product. Teaching of reading became an industry supplying not only textbooks but also reading machines. One aspect that gained prominence was the need to read more quickly. To both the public and schools, devices, some based on tachistoscopes, and courses training in eye movement were offered commercially to help the buyer increase speed from a typical 200 to 400 words per minute to at least 650 and even several thousand. Universities as well as schools established reading laboratories to aid students in improving their skills in speed and comprehension.

Special courses were introduced into teacher training institutions for reading specialists and schools hired learning-assistance teachers whose main job became remedial reading. Clinicians contributed towards helping non-readers; dyslexia, for instance, moved from being a syndrome describing people who had difficulty in recognizing and writing letters to a neurological dysfunction of the brain. Learning theorists contributed "taxonomies" (e.g. Bloom et.al., 1956) analyzing the different objectives so that levels and types of achievement could be tested. Another development was the need to be initiated into the arcane language of teaching language arts by taking courses.

While the reading wars raged round them, most teachers continued with what they found effective, using in their own ways whatever was supplied or available. It seemed that the phonics crusaders had won against the infidel whole-word supporters. But it was not to last.

In the 1980s, the supposedly miraculous results of Marie Clay's Reading Recovery programme in New Zealand was an inspiration to those elsewhere who felt uncomfortable with or rejected what they saw as the repetitious, teacher-directed instruction broken up into separate packages of language arts. "Whole Language" became the new faith.

Advocates claimed it was more than a teaching method, but a philosophy. Reading should not be taught but acquired through the student actually reading real books, following as the teacher reads, using context, pictures and known words to understand even if every word is not familiar. Motivation rather than instruction would be the key, child-centred rather than teacher-directed. While phonics would be taught incidentally, teaching separate language skills (encoding, decoding, spelling) in isolation was rejected. Interestingly, the philosophy and methods of the Progressive Education movement of the early 1900s are rarely mentioned in literature on Whole Language.

The converts rejected any suggestion that it was just a revival of the look-and-say method. If meaning and motivation are present, the child will learn to read as naturally as to talk. Despite opposition from a few who said its success was unproven, its appeal was so seductive that many schools (such as California in 1987) and most teacher-training institutions embraced it.

Although some evidence was produced to support its effectiveness, methodology was subordinated to ideology. While older teachers fumed over the neglect of teaching basic skills, younger teachers rejoiced at the love of learning they saw in their students. Soon books constructed on a phonics basis were hard to find in schools, and new teachers had no grounding in how to teach phonics. But the explosion of "learning disabilities" mandated a costly industry of psychologists, special education teachers and reading specialists. How many students were genuinely disabled and how many were recruited to fill the need for clients is hard to say. Overall, the end results did not change.

But the joy was not to last, for the pendulum swung back more quickly this time. In the U.S.A., the "reading wars" became not only an educational issue but also entered the realm of politics and religion. In their nostalgia and their frustration at what they perceived as inadequate development of language skills by their children, many parents became a ready market for sales of phonics books and commercial tutorial schools. They saw poor spelling in particular as an indication that the "new" methods were unsatisfactory.

Commercial interests filled the gap marketing not only books but this time computer programmes as well, and tutorial companies multiplied their branches. *Hooked on Phonics* has sold over two million copies. In some places in North America, voters were able to persuade politicians to set up "charter schools" which reflected the "back-to-basics" movement. Lower standardized test scores were used as evidence that the new methods had failed.

In 1996 in response to voter demand, the California legislature decreed that phonics must be taught, closely followed by Texas and other states. The whole-language advocates retreated, but not very far. The fashionable word now is "balance" with the whole language people maintaining that they also teach phonics without abandoning the essentials of their method. Because "balance" is in the hands of the holder, to find out what is actually happening, we must go into individual schools and classrooms.

The Larger Context

> English spelling is weird ... or is it wierd ?
> —Irwin Hill

We should be careful not to separate the teaching of reading from the general philosophy of education and views of how children should be treated. Another way of looking at the great reading debate is to ask who is on what side. Those that have an analytic (scientific) view of the world are more likely to support phonics along with those who support mental discipline; those who have a holistic (intuitive) view are likely to support the whole word methods as are those who support free development. The first are more likely to demand proof through controlled investigations and the latter are more likely to demand a larger view than cannot be shown by narrow testing. It could be that there was a swing back to the phonics method in the 1960s when those who had expected great things from science were in control, and a swing to whole word in the 1980s when those who had experienced the 1960s self-expression movement rose to positions of influence.

Another aspect to consider is the place of educational theory among scholarly pursuits. Up until the late 18th century, people looked back to the past for inspiration and authority. With the new thinkers came the idea of progress. When they saw the advances in science and industry they felt that they could build a better society based on social and economic change. If the physicians could cure more people and engineers could build better machines, then schools could teach better. In education, along with other social institutions, change was equated with progress. Education should also have its developments as did other disciplines. Administrators and academic theorists advanced their careers with innovations and the production of studies.

That schools are more pleasant places now than they were a hundred or two hundred years ago is undeniable. That the students learn more, taking into account the information and ideas available in the different times and the amount of time spent at school, is questionable. Real progress has been made, not in the changes in the theory of teaching methods, but in the reduction of class sizes, better facilities and the greater provision of attractive teaching and learning materials, and more, if not better, education of the teachers. Success, or lack of it, in children learning is probably related closer to the home and social conditions that they come from than how they are taught at school. Changing the method of instruction from one way that is done well to another way that is done well is not likely to make much difference.

Although our knowledge of adult motivations and needs has not changed very much since Classical times, children are no longer treated as miniature adults. We now have accepted that their needs and perception of the world are different, as much from the insights of writers of fiction as from academic studies.

Our understanding of how children learn is at about the stage of medicine before Harvey discovered the circulation of blood. Some very useful information has been discovered in recent years on such things as early childhood language development, but much more needs to be done before we can prescribe with certainty, if we ever can, what are the best methods of enabling them to learn. Any success in remedial reading classes is probably more the result of the small group and one-on-one instruction than the method used.

With the variabilities in the make-up of each child and the vast complex of influences that come from his or her environment, each child is different and will react in different ways. It is unlikely that there will ever be a "one size fits all" method of teaching. The danger is that, as in medicine where a physician may try to fit the patient to the cure, a teacher will fit the child to the teaching method as he or she must with the numbers in any class. Fortunately most children have that innate human flexibility which enables them to fit in with any teaching and find their own way if they are given support and the right environment. Those who deplore a low level of literacy are likely looking at a symptom not a disease.

Who is Right?

> We talked of the education of children; and I asked him what he thought was the best way to teach them first. Johnson: " Sir, it is no matter what you teach them first, any more than what leg you shall put into your breeches first. Sir, you may stand disputing which is best to put in first, but in the mean time your breech is bare. Sir, while you are considering which of two things you should teach your child first, another boy has learnt them both."
>
> —*Boswell*, Life of Samuel Johnson, L.L.D

Who is right? Both and neither. Both in that most children use the word in context along with analysis of the letters and syllables to learn to read whether they are taught these ways or not. Neither in that other factors such as interest in the materials and the attractiveness of the learning environment are more important than any theoretical method. Beyond the philosophy behind the teaching of reading is the adaptability of the books and the willingness and ability of the teacher to use whatever will help at an any given moment with a particular child. And with the right books, most children will find their own way.

Success in learning to read depends more on the enthusiasm, ability and energy of the teachers and children than on any particular teaching method.

Some conclusions:

1. The majority of children will learn to read no matter what the method.

2. The environment, attitudes, and expectations both within and without the school are more important than any method.

3. Any method can be less effective if it is the dull repetition of meaningless letters and phonics, or the rote memory of hundreds of whole words in boring stories. Any method can be made stimulating by a resourceful teacher. Dogmatic adherence to one method may be harmful; adaptability to a child and situation is likely to be more productive.

4. At some stage, all children need to learn enough attack skills (phonics) to decipher new words. While the evidence is inconclusive, careful studies indicate that direct instruction works best for most children.

5. Children's readiness to learn varies. With little help, some will quickly learn the basics at an early age; others will not be ready until much older. Attempts to force too early may hinder later development.

6. A small group of children have specific problems that need special psychological or medical diagnosis and treatment by experts. Appropriate learning assistance may help; inappropriate may aggravate the problem.

7. Often what is called poor reading is really lack of background knowledge and understanding. After basic literacy has been achieved, there are specialized literacies.

8. Much reading and writing are subject specific. Many areas of knowledge need special attack skills that are best taught within the context of a particular subject. This may be as obvious as learning a specialized vocabulary, to deciphering implied meanings, recognizing tone, and understanding symbols and metaphors. The phrase, "every teacher is a teacher of reading," is more than a cliché.

9. The best way to improve reading and writing is to read and write with lots of variety and some direction. To maintain the skills, regular application is needed.

10. Common sense rather than philosophical dogma should prevail.

Further Reading

> Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do.
>
> —*Dr. Benjamin Spock, opening line of* Baby and Child Care

As this paper was meant for general readers rather than scholars, detailed references were not given. In fact, I found that much of what appears here had already been dealt with by others but had usually been ignored by advocates of the different methods. For a similar work by a reading specialist, the reader is referred to two connected papers by William T. Stokes *Understanding the Phonics Debates: Part I* and *Recent History of the Phonics Debates: Part II*. These papers also have useful references for someone who wants to read more deeply on the subject. See:
http://www.lesley.edu/academic_centers/hood/currents/v1n1/stokes.html
http://www.lesley.edu/academic_centers/hood/currents/v1n2/stokes.html

One useful source that Stokes does not list is: Mathews, Mitford M., *Teaching to Read, Historically Considered*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1967 (This is the best book that I have seen on the topic. Much of the information in this article was from it, particularly for the 19th century.)

For links to the Whole Language/Phonics debate, one place to start is at:

http://www.middleweb.com/Reading.html#anchor5517892

A number of early school texts can be found at The University of Pittsburgh site:

http://digital.library.pitt.edu/nietz/index.html

A Final Comment:

> The barbarians are not at the gates. They are inside the gates -- and have academic tenure, judicial appointments, government grants, and control of the movies, television, and other media. Virtually everything that was supposed to make things better made things worse. What has failed is accepted without question by so-called 'thinking people' and what worked is disdained as being out of touch with the times.
>
> —Thomas Sowell

In reading the works of educational theorists, it is unsettling to see how few have a knowledge of the history of education. So many policy and decision makers do not have a reasonable knowledge of what has been said and done before.

> You teach a child to read, and he or she will be able to pass a literacy test.
>
> —President George W. Bush
> (Townsend, Tenn., Feb. 21, 2001)

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