CHAPTER 8

Laura Zirbes (1884–1967): A Premier Progressive Educator

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Historical Research Process

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED Laura Zirbes's name while examining the beginnings of content area reading instruction. During an investigation of early 20th-century recommendations for reading and writing across the curriculum, I studied numerous reading education textbooks, professional association yearbooks, university monograph series, and journal articles of the time. While conducting this inquiry, I found Laura Zirbes's forthright advocacy of progressive education, which included linking reading instruction with subject matter instruction, to be remarkable. I cited her work as representing the progressive tradition in reading education (Moore, Readence, & Rickelman, 1983) and became interested in learning more about her.

Shaping the Reading Field: The Impact of Early Reading Pioneers, Scientific Research, and Progressive Ideas, edited by Susan E. Israel and E. Jennifer Monaghan.
Photo: Courtesy of the Association for Childhood Education International, Olney, Maryland.

When many of my reading education colleagues revealed only a limited knowledge of progressive reading education and practically no knowledge of Zirbes, I set out to explain her contributions to the field. I completed a brief intellectual history by spotlighting and contextualizing 32 of her more than 200 publications (Moore, 1986). Since then, noteworthy doctoral dissertations by Reid (1993) and Teel (2000) have contributed appreciably to my thinking about this extraordinary educator. My contention in my earlier report as well as here is that Zirbes's view of progressive reading education offers a productive reference point for examining other views; her conception of a sensible curriculum provides valuable perspective on today's reading curricula.

Personal and Professional Life

Born April 26, 1884, in Buffalo, New York, USA, Laura Zirbes spent her childhood in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, USA. (For a helpful chronology of Zirbes, see Reid, 1993, pp. 303–307.) The limited information available about her family reveals that she had a brother and sister (Teel, 2000, p. 118). Like many women of her generation who chose a career, she never married.

At the age of 14, Zirbes moved with her family to Cleveland, Ohio, USA, where her father served as pastor of the First German Baptist Church (Reid, 1993, pp. 48–49). Zirbes referred to her father a few times in her publications, telling how he left Catholic priesthood seminary training because he was harassed for disagreeing with the Church's teachings (Reid, 1993, pp. 48–49). On another occasion she told of his emotional goodbye while seeing her and her sister off to a trip to Europe (Teel, 2000, p. 118). In 1901 she completed a high school curriculum devoted to scientific and classical courses and graduated from the prestigious Central High School in Cleveland. Such a feat might seem somewhat commonplace today, but relatively few girls at the time completed a college preparation course of study and graduated from high school (Teel, 2000, pp. 76–81).

After her high school graduation, Zirbes entered the Cleveland Normal Training School and completed its teacher preparation program for the Cleveland public schools. She began teaching fourth grade in Cleveland at the age of 19. She later recounted two incidents with her teaching supervisors during her first year that characterize beliefs and principles she held throughout her career. After only a few weeks of teaching, she took her teacher's man-

ual into her principal's office and informed him, "I didn't have to be told what to do by a book that was written by somebody I didn't know, and who never saw the children I was teaching" (as quoted in Reid, 1993, p. 23). She recalled that positive things happened in her classroom once she was allowed to put the manual aside, determine what the children needed in order to grow, and proceed straight for that growth (Reid, 1993, p. 23). The second incident involved arithmetic instruction. Zirbes retold this episode as follows:

> When I was still teaching in a fourth grade, I found a way of doing something about basic number learnings which enabled my pupils to make high test scores in arithmetic. The supervisor seemed to assume that those test scores were arrived at dishonestly. I was aware of her suspicion but said that I was not surprised at the high test results. I expected them to be high, because I thought what I was doing was better than what I had ever done before. When I explained what I had done and told her how I had deviated from procedures recommended in the course of study, she said, "My dear, you are too analytical." I wondered what was wrong about being analytical, but didn't say so. After reprimanding me for deviating from drill methods, she concluded her remarks by saying, "You certainly do not make a good cog." I could hardly believe my ears, I said, "Cog? Cog? I don't think the Lord intended me to be a cog!" (quoted in Teel, 2000, p. 93)

Zirbes requested to be transferred to a classroom where she was not expected to deliver cogwheeled teaching, so her superintendent assigned her to a class of slow learners where such teaching was failing. Once there, she began thoroughly documenting her innovative teaching practices and meticulously recording her students' test results so she could justify her actions to her new supervisor. Her supervisor turned out to be quite impressed and passed her records to Charles Hubbard Judd (see chapter 4, this volume), director of the University of Chicago's School of Education and a leading educational researcher. This led to the publication of her classroom report "Diagnostic Measurement as a Basis for Procedure" in *The Elementary School Journal* (Zirbes, 1918). Her report attracted attention by fusing the new scientific educational research procedures of the time, such as hypothesis testing and extensive data analyses, with emerging beliefs about child-centered instruction. Zirbes's findings supported her practices of accommodating individual differences by grouping students for instruction as well as emphasizing reading interests and attitudes along with achievement (Reid, 1993, pp. 27–31).

In 1920 Otis Caldwell, director of the Lincoln School of Teachers College, Columbia University, invited Zirbes to join his staff as a research associate (Reid, 1993, p. 31). Lincoln School was a well-funded and highly visible experimental center devoted to identifying effective instruction. Zirbes's professional identity flourished there as evidenced by her service on the National Society for the Study of Education's (NSSE) National Committee on Reading as well as her service on the National Education Association's Commission on the Curriculum Subcommittee on Reading. She wrote chapters for the NSSE's 24th yearbook on providing for individual differences, administering reading tests, and diagnosing and remediating reading problems (Whipple, 1925, pp. x, 227–289). She also served as an assistant editor of the *Journal of Educational Psychology* and the *Journal of Educational Research*.

During the time she was working as a research associate at Lincoln School, Zirbes enrolled as a student at Teachers College, eventually becoming a lecturer there while earning her bachelor's degree in 1925, master's degree in 1926, and doctoral degree in 1928. She interacted with the illustrious Columbia University educators of the time, such as John Dewey, Arthur Irving Gates (see chapter 14, this volume), William Heard Kilpatrick, and Edward Lee Thorndike (see chapter 5, this volume). She also began a long period of collaboration with the University of Chicago's William Scott Gray (see chapter 13, this volume). Her doctoral dissertation, "Comparative Studies of Current Practice in Reading, with Techniques for the Improvement of Teaching," was published as a *Teachers College Contributions to Education* (Zirbes, 1928a). Her dissertation was an important work, analyzing more than 600 reading research reports conducted since the turn of the century and framing their findings according to a progressive philosophy and set of beliefs.

Upon earning her doctorate in 1928, Zirbes joined The Ohio State University faculty. She contributed substantially to the elementary education program at Ohio State, which was called the Department of Principles and Practices when she arrived (Teel, 2000, p. 124), serving as the first permanent faculty member specializing in this area and helping to restructure the program and form it into a hub of progressive education (Reid, 1993, pp. 74–92). At the same time, she published widely on reading in scholarly journals and even turned her attention to writing for children, authoring or coauthoring five nonfiction children's books between 1926 and 1939.

Throughout her time at Ohio State, Zirbes maintained her early interests in and convictions about reading instruction while expanding her attention

to other fields. For instance, she held several leadership positions within the Progressive Education Association (PEA). As this group declined and eventually dissolved in 1955, she became active in the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), chairing the Board of Editors of this group's premier journal, *Childhood Education* (Reid, 1993, pp. 180–202). Interestingly, she never joined the International Reading Association—or its parent organizations prior to the Association's formation in 1956—disdaining a perceived narrowness in the Association and all other educational associations devoted to a single school subject (Reid, 1993, p. 265). She once told a friend that she stopped being a reading specialist right after publishing her dissertation in 1928 (Reid, 1993, p. 198), and she published only three articles in *The Reading Teacher* during her career (Zirbes, 1951, 1961, 1963).

In 1948 President Truman presented Zirbes with the National Women's Press Club's Woman of the Year Award for achievement in education, calling her a "teacher of teachers" (Reid, 1993, p. 109). In addition, the ACEI placed Zirbes's name on the Roll of Honor that the association displays in its Washington, DC, headquarters to recognize the outstanding accomplishments of selected people in childhood education. Zirbes retired from Ohio State as professor emeritus in 1954. Perhaps her most significant publication, *Spurs to Creative Teaching*, appeared in 1959. Stauffer's 1960 review of this book for *The Reading Teacher* characterizes it as follows:

> The many students who have sat at her feet, as well as the many, many more who have heard her lecture only a time or two, will recognize immediately the Laura Zirbes they admire and respect. She has written this, her book, with the sparkle, the warmth, and the soundness of an astute person who has lived a life dedicated to the proposition that man is creative by nature and that good teaching fosters courageous initiative or creative self-direction. (Stauffer, 1960, p. 315)

Zirbes remained a popular speaker after her retirement (Reid, 1993, pp. 314–319). She died on June 9, 1967, at the age of 83 in Columbus, Ohio, USA.

Philosophical Beliefs and Guiding Principles

Laura Zirbes was shaped by and helped shape many of the beliefs and principles espoused by progressive U.S. educators during the early 1900s. Her re-

action against mechanistic, prescribed instruction as a first-year teacher suggests that she was predisposed toward progressive approaches, and she associated with progressive luminaries such as John Dewey and William Heard Kilpatrick during her formative experiences at the Lincoln School and Teachers College (Reid, 1993, pp. 38–41). Articles such as "Progressive Practice in Reading" (Zirbes, 1928b) and "Progressive Training for Elementary Teachers" (Zirbes, 1929a), along with her 1930 to 1942 Executive Committee service for the PEA (Reid, 1993, p. 183), attest to her unequivocal self-identification as a progressive educator. However, simply connecting Zirbes with progressivism does not describe her beliefs and principles because progressivism was not a unitary, cohesive system. Progressive educators promoted ideas ranging from individual freedom and social reconstruction to social efficiency and centralized school administration (Cremin, 1961).

Characterizing Zirbes's progressivism is knotty because she aspired to integration, enmeshing her thoughts and actions organically (Reid, 1993, p. 122). Pulling out separate pieces from her writings runs the risk of misrepresenting their ecological connections. Nevertheless, it seems safe to say that Zirbes adhered to a specific mode of progressivism that reacted against traditional reading instruction emphases on declamation, rote learning, and the literary canon. A personal statement she wrote at age 82 in a letter to a close friend mentions some key ideas that stand out as a fitting encapsulation of her beliefs and principles:

> While...many of those whom I was privileged to teach have *become* leaders, there is a new "breed" which is alien to them in midcareer, and alien to the faith in a creative developmental, personalized approach, which characterizes dedicated teachers. (cited in Reid, 1993, p. 311)

Zirbes's emphasis here on teaching indicates her lifelong focus and perhaps her greatest contribution. She took pride in her undergraduate teaching and graduate student advising at Ohio State as well as in her guest presentations, explaining how to enact progressive principles with groups of real children. She continually inquired into elementary school classroom concerns, maintaining a questioning perspective and seeking to find ways to best educate particular classrooms of children (Teel, 2000, pp. 171–172).

During the beginnings of the development of the elementary education program at Ohio State, Zirbes forthrightly stated that she intended to develop

"a training program based upon a practical interpretation of progressive educational ideals" (Zirbes, 1929a, p. 250). She attended to her undergraduate teacher preparation classes and workshops passionately, always working to improve them. When her numerous graduate-level students and advisees campaigned to place her on the ACEI Roll of Honor, they characterized her with terms such as "one of the truly outstanding educators of our country" (Reid, 1993, p. 95) and "one of the most inspiring teachers that I was privileged to have" (p. 96), also saying that "she exemplified the highest quality as an educator" (p. 97). President Truman's citation of her as a teacher of teachers seems apt. In the excerpt from her letter cited previously, Zirbes's reference to a creative approach to teaching spotlights her beliefs about the importance of inventiveness and originality. She abhorred preset, lockstep, cogwheeled teaching, believing that it robbed learners as well as teachers of essential opportunities to form important understandings and attitudes.

Along this line, Zirbes continually advocated experimentation (Teel, 2000, pp. 123–173). She regularly tested ideas and instructional approaches, and she encouraged teachers to do the same. Indeed, she launched her career in academia by investigating and reporting her innovative classroom teaching practices with slow learners (Zirbes, 1918). She also tested workshop approaches to teaching, examining through trial and error how best to conduct small-group inquiries before recommending them to others.

Zirbes's adherence to creativity is also evident in her pioneering work with the technological innovations of her time, such as her use in the 1920s of lantern slides and stereographs to develop children's concepts (Zirbes, 1924b) and in the 1940s of voice recordings to present case studies, lectures, and panel discussions during professional development sessions (Reid, 1993, p. 87). Interestingly, one voice recording on education and mental health that was meant for Parent Teacher Association discussions contained an evaluation sheet for assessing how the session had gone in order to inform future sessions. Another aspect of creativity that Zirbes adhered to involved the arts (Klohr, 1996). She regularly infused the visual arts, music, dance, and drama into her teaching, and she expected teachers to do the same. She believed that intellectual and artistic processes were complementary.

In the personal letter excerpted earlier, Zirbes's mention of a developmental, personalized approach to teaching indicates her bedrock beliefs and principles. In line with the child-study research of G. Stanley Hall and Arnold Gesell, Zirbes believed that children progress through stages of growth char-

acterized by emerging abilities to accomplish increasingly complex tasks. She also believed that children progress through these stages according to their own timetables and that educators should expect groups of children to display individual differences. Along with these realizations supported by scientific research, Zirbes held a deep, personal ethic of caring for each child as a unique individual (Reid, 1993, pp. 122–127). In brief, Zirbes's philosophical beliefs and guiding principles can be characterized in large part as a commitment to furnishing creative, developmental, and personalized attention to children's education. These beliefs and principles are apparent in her professional contributions to reading education.

Contributions to the Field of Reading

Laura Zirbes was first and foremost an educator. Her contributions to the field of reading mainly involve her applications of progressive thought to the goals and methods of elementary school reading instruction as well as elementary teacher education.

Goals of Reading Instruction

Zirbes regularly scorned reading programs that emphasized skill development over other important goals, advocating balanced reading development as the goal of instruction long before contemporary educators such as Pressley (2002) and Reutzel and Cooter (1999)—to name a few—began supporting it during the turn of the 21st century. As Zirbes wrote in the late 1920s, "We still find the market filled with prescriptive material for class room work in reading which ride roughshod over relative values and justifies itself in heightened power at the expense of all round, balanced growth" (1928b, p. 102). The goal of balanced reading growth that she prized combined skills with concepts, attitudes, and values (Moore, 1986).

Zirbes viewed reading as a vital tool for developing readers' concepts. Many educators considered that teaching students how to read to learn was appropriate only in the upper grades, but she embedded such reading in the lower grades: "Reading in the progressive classrooms of today begins not only with experience, but enriches experience by serving as a stimulus to creative expression and by concerning itself with content as well as skills" (Zirbes, 1928b, pp. 99–100). Zirbes advocated the use of informational texts in elementary schools so children could learn about the world while

learning how to read. Evidence of her partiality to this type of reading material comes from the children's books she wrote or co-wrote throughout her career. All six of the children's books she produced were informational:

1. *The Story of Milk, for Boys and Girls Who Have Just Learned to Read* (Zirbes & Wesley, 1926)
2. *Workers: Written for Boys and Girls Who Want to Read About the Busy World* (Zirbes & Wesley, 1928)
3. *Animal Tales: True Stories for Boys and Girls Who Like to Read About Animals* (Keliher in collaboration with Zirbes, 1930)
4. *Little Journeys With Washington* (Zirbes, 1932a)
5. *The Book of Pets, for Boys and Girls Learning to Read* (Zirbes & Keliher, 1928)
6. *How Many Bears?* (Zirbes, 1960)

Along with concept development, Zirbes considered positive attitudes toward reading to be a legitimate instructional goal. She focused on students' feelings toward reading along with their abilities because she realized the connection: "Certain reading procedures which build skills at the expense of attitude have been prevalent and they too often eventuate by defeating their own ends" (Zirbes, 1925, p. 864). She acted on the belief that emphasizing skill over will was counterproductive. Moreover, Zirbes valued reading for what it could offer throughout a lifetime. She believed that those who would not read were as disadvantaged as those who could not read. She emphasized the power as well as the pleasure of reading: "If you are teaching reading creatively and developmentally, you are introducing children to satisfaction that will enrich their whole lives" (Zirbes, 1959, p. 172).

Zirbes also believed that developing students' personal values was an important goal of instruction. For example, she supplied The Ohio State University School's youngsters with cumbersome wooden blocks that were one- and two-feet square so the children playing with them would learn the value of cooperation along with geometric size relations (Reid, 1993, p. 146). In a manner similar to many of today's character education programs, she also advocated reading selections for children that portrayed desirable character traits such as respect and responsibility. And realizing that children developed their personalities through time, she planned active and purposeful reading

engagements so children would become active and purposeful inside and outside of class with other activities. As she put it, "The modern reading program finds its true realization and justification in the contribution it makes to the development of personalities" (Zirbes, 1940, p. 155). In brief, the goals of reading instruction are malleable. U.S. schools over the years have emphasized reading as a means of achieving religious, moral, civic, and workforce ideals (Smith, 2002). Part of Laura Zirbes's contributions to the field of reading was in fleshing out how progressive thought informed the goals of reading instruction. Her application of creativity, developmentalism, and personalization led to the goal of balancing reading growth relative to skills, concepts, attitudes, and values.

Methods of Reading Instruction

Zirbes's applications of progressive thought to the methods of classroom reading instruction were consistent with her goals. The record of her teaching and publications shows the goal of balanced reading development being achieved largely through the methods of purposeful activity, functional instruction, language arts integration, and wide reading (Moore, 1986).

Purposeful activity. Traditional reading activities prior to the early 1900s mainly consisted of oral readings and recalls of texts (Cuban, 1993; Finkelstein, 1989). Although some reading texts of the time provided questions with the passages, and some of the questions required students to go beyond rote recall (Venezky, 1987), children generally were expected to reconstruct as faithfully as possible what the author wrote by reading aloud accurately and recalling text verbatim. As progressive thought began permeating classrooms, reading activities began to include more and more thinking about textual contents. Rather than being told to "speak distinctly and mind your stops" (Corson, 1895, p. 811), students were directed to read silently to "see how the story ends...see how many persons would be needed to play the story" or "find out whether the story could be true" (Zirbes, 1929b, pp. 95–96). Contemporary attention to reading as understanding "has been largely a feature of the twentieth century" (Monaghan & Saul, 1987, p. 88).

Expecting children to read and infer underlying ideas, rather than read and memorize surface details, was a substantial advance in terms of purposeful, meaningful activity, and having students answer thought-provoking

questions after reading became a dominant mode of instruction. Zirbes's contribution to this type of reading is evident in her coauthored publication "Practice Exercises and Checks on Silent Reading in the Primary Grade" (Zirbes, Keelor, & Miner, 1927) that recommended the following types of questions for checking second-grade readers:

1. Yes–no questions
2. Questions of fact
3. Questions that involve judgment or interpretation
4. Questions that show a realization of sequence or organization
5. Questions that involve comprehension of correct relationship (between facts or phrases)
6. Questions to ascertain whether probable or possible answers are recognized when in contradiction to content or story
7. Questions in which the response leads to or indicates appreciation
8. Questions involving the assembling of a series of replies to a single question, to lead to thoroughness of comprehension and complete replies. (p. 45)

Pinpointing the cognitive processes that these types of questions tap is difficult without seeing the stimulus passages as well as the responses considered acceptable. On the surface, however, these questions seem to range along Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) from remembering (questions of fact) to creating (questions involving the assembling of a series of replies to lead to complete replies). In addition, this 1927 report reveals Zirbes's early advocacy of children reading short passages and then answering questions. Durkin's (1978/1979) landmark report of classroom observations 50 years later revealed the prevalence of this question-answering, comprehension-checking approach to reading instruction. Although contemporary constructivist perspectives (Kintsch, 2004) and sociocognitive perspectives (Gee, 2004) point to the shortcomings of this approach, it deserves credit for enhancing previous instructional activities.

Further, while initially believing that thought-provoking questions about short passages stimulated purposeful activity, Zirbes later pioneered new, more purposeful activity in the form of projects. She spent time with William Heard Kilpatrick at Teachers College and noted in one of her early publications that he was one of her "sources of insight and inspiration" (1924a, p.

150). Kilpatrick's (1918) well-known project method, which involved "wholehearted purposeful activity" (p. 320), involved children in self-directed inquiry projects, which Zirbes eventually promoted actively. According to Zirbes (1932b), "There is a vast difference between purposeful reading and assigned reading. The teacher who begins by saying, 'Now I want you to do thus and so,' is not getting purposeful reading. We must guide the reader to set up purposes for himself" (p. 6). Purposeful activity also played a role in Zirbes's elementary teacher preparation courses at The Ohio State University. Moving away from traditional lectures, assignments, and tests, she moved toward workshops that involved a "practical, hands on, analytical, problem-solving approach in which students were involved in group work for some common purpose" (Reid, 1993, p. 76). Moreover, preservice teachers at Ohio State were expected to visit social agencies such as orphanages and hospitals as well as recreational sites like summer camps and playgrounds to deepen their understandings of children's overall growth and development while engaged in purposeful activity (Reid, 1993, pp. 78–80).

During her years at Ohio State, Zirbes emphasized purposeful learning in all areas of the curriculum, advocating it for mathematics, science, and social studies as much as for reading and writing. She rejected skill instruction for its own sake, calling for instruction to be embedded in bona fide, relevant experiences and projects. Her celebrated advocacy of purposeful learning across the curriculum was one reason why Tanner and Tanner (1995) assert that she was "one of the pioneering women in the curriculum field" (p. 634).

Functional instruction. Zirbes opposed preset, systematic programs that were designed without knowledge of specific children, yet stipulated what they were to read, when they were to read, and what instruction they were to receive. As far as she was concerned, limiting reading instruction to a certain segment of the day disintegrated opportunities for effective instruction. She reported one incident that expressed her concerns well:

> I am thinking of a teaching situation where a teacher had used decorations to make the whole class-room radiate a Christmas spirit. There were Christmas pictures—one a Santa Claus—cutouts, chains and evergreens. It was just before Christmas and the children were flooded with Christmas, when she said, "Now children, forget all about Christmas and take out your readers; we are going to read *The Gray Cat* today." (Zirbes, 1932b, pp. 5–6)

In line with the celebrated progressive notion of teachable moments, Zirbes advocated functional instruction. She espoused the idea of involving children in purposeful activities and then providing appropriate resources and guidance as needed. She supported reading instruction that occurred across the curriculum, not just during a time set aside for it, and that provided specific instruction according to what students required to accomplish projects (Zirbes, 1928b).

Arguing against radical beliefs in a laissez faire approach, where children discovered knowledge entirely on their own, Zirbes championed guidance. Yet she believed that guidance needed to be contextualized functionally in purposeful activity. According to Zirbes, progressive practice "grants that there are places for specific training, but those places are on the way to broader outcomes, and should be determined with reference to specific needs and uses" (Zirbes, 1928a, p. 47).

Zirbes's commitment to functional instruction was firm. Even though she and William S. Gray had collaborated on the renowned 24th yearbook of the NSSE (Whipple, 1925), along with two other substantive projects (Gray & Zirbes, 1927–1928a, 1927–1928b), she declined several of his invitations to coauthor a basal reader program (Moore, 1986, p. 667). When she reviewed the 37th NSSE yearbook that Gray chaired, she criticized its "abiding and unquestioning faith in the 'systematic introduction of skills in an orderly arrangement of successively difficult steps'" (Zirbes, 1937, p. 221). She pointed out the yearbook's failure to present functional instruction, an alternative to systematic skills instruction.

Interestingly, in a 1949 interview Gray invoked the significance of progressivism with these words: "The formal instruction of previous decades no longer exists in classrooms which have adopted progressive methods. Instruction is highly motivated, carefully planned, and well adjusted to the varying needs and problems of children" (Robinson, 2005, p. 436). Despite this acknowledgment of progressivism, Gray's systematic views on when reading instruction should occur differed from Zirbes's functional views.

Language arts integration. Integrating language arts instruction is a predictable step for someone who advocated balanced development. As Zirbes (1940) put it, "Reading is to be conceived and treated as an integral phase or aspect of total language development" (p. 152). She early and often promoted instructional situations that included reading, writing, listening, and

speaking. During the beginning of her career, she published illustrative units of problem-based instruction that connected the language arts (Zirbes, 1924a); later in her career, she helped break new ground by contributing to the language experience approach to beginning reading (Zirbes, 1951). Along this line, she had very little to say about initial reading instruction at the word level even in her pioneering article on language experience. She advocated the language experience approach's whole-to-part progression of examining words and their parts but recommended practically no additional practices beyond that. Especially after moving to The Ohio State University, she approached reading broadly, focusing on issues such as meaning, purpose, and value. She disdained basal readers that approached reading narrowly, focusing on the compilation of discrete phonic skills and sight words.

Project and experience approaches to instruction are similar in their emphases on student-centered, purposeful activity as well as on language arts connections. In addition, these approaches typically involve artistic and media representations, two forms of expression Zirbes frequently included in her instruction (Klohr, 1996). To illustrate, in the projects she designed for a health textbook (Bigelow & Broadhurst, 1924), Zirbes called for children to mount pictures from old magazines as a speech prop and to produce a safety-related picture book that included rules under each picture. When referring to the language experience approach, she noted its direct link with children's speech as well as its tendency to promote "dramatic play, vivid group discussion, and creative expression in various media" (Zirbes, 1951, p. 1).

Wide reading. At the middle of the 20th century, Zirbes (1950) reported that the new abundance of children's reading materials was "an educational achievement of note" (p. 2). She appreciated children's literature for its role in balanced development, believing that selections written at different levels of difficulty and addressing different topics provided children with optimal opportunities to grow. Wide reading necessarily occurred in classrooms in which children participated in projects. Children at different levels of proficiency inquiring into different topics required access to varied materials. Zirbes had great faith in the power of diverse materials to enable children to learn new vocabulary and ideas, develop positive feelings about books, enrich understandings of what was important to people, and increase reading proficiencies (Moore, 1986).

While Zirbes generally supported multiple materials being available, she had a special preference for informational books. As noted earlier, the

children's books she wrote addressed animals, milk, and workers, presenting information about the world to children in an accessible fashion, and she recommended such materials for primary as well as higher grade levels. In addition, she championed meaningful materials that contributed to growth. In contrast with many of the book-buying public, she had particular disgust for Dr. Seuss' book *The Cat in the Hat* (Seuss, 1957) because of its nonsensical content and language and what she considered to be a "blatant attempt to write what would sell rather than what would be good for children" (cited in Reid, 1993, p. 147).

In sum, Zirbes's contributions to reading education involve her reading instruction goals that balanced skills with concepts, attitudes, and values. The methods of reading instruction that she advocated—purposeful activity, functional instruction, language arts integration, and wide reading—are additional professional offerings.

Lessons for the Future

Table 1, titled *Contemporary Reading Instruction Compared With Progressive Reading Instruction*, matches a recent U.S. survey's selected summary of actual present-day instruction (Baumann, Hoffman, Duffy-Hester, & Ro, 2000) with progressive recommendations for such instruction as articulated in this study of Laura Zirbes. Comparing contemporary elementary school reading instruction with progressive recommendations for such instruction provides perspective on the present and generates ideas for the future.

Table 1 shows that recent elementary school teachers and administrators generally embrace a balanced, eclectic set of philosophy and goals. Although this finding seems similar to progressive ideals, closer analysis reveals that the survey respondents were advocating a relatively narrow view of balance. They embraced goals such as "(a) to develop readers who are skillful and strategic in word identification, fluency, and reading comprehension and (b) to develop readers who are independent and motivated to choose, appreciate, and enjoy literature" (Baumann et al. 2000, p. 349). Progressive educators such as Zirbes probably would applaud the inclusion of skills and attitudes among the goals of reading instruction, but progressives likely would add concepts and values. As this chapter shows, Zirbes advocated reading selections and activities that would improve children's understandings of the world and enhance their regard for desirable personal values.

TABLE 1
Contemporary Reading Instruction Compared With Progressive Reading Instruction

Category	Contemporary Reading Instruction	Progressive Reading Instruction
Philosophy and goals	• Balanced, eclectic perspective pervaded • Major theme of systematic instruction in decoding along with a literature-rich environment • Common goal was to produce skillful, fluent, motivated, independent readers	Balanced development based on • concepts • attitudes • values • skills
Instructional time and materials	• Considerable time dedicated to reading and language arts instruction and activities • Basals and trade books used in combination	• Purposeful activity • Functional instruction • Language arts integration • Wide reading

She viewed reading not as a destination by itself but as a vehicle for significant personal and social outcomes.

The table also shows recent elementary school teachers and administrators reporting "considerable time" being dedicated to reading and language arts instruction and activities. Closer analysis here reveals that on average 55 minutes per day is dedicated to teacher-directed strategy instruction; 42 minutes per day to applying and extending instruction in activities such as read alouds, sustained silent reading, and student led response groups; and 46 minutes per day to language arts instruction such as writing workshops, oral language activities, and spelling (Baumann et al., 2000, p. 350). Basals and trade books are said to be used in combination. Progressive educators like Zirbes probably would acknowledge today's apparent language arts integration and wide reading as appropriate, but they likely would raise questions about purposeful activity and functional instruction. Are today's children engaged only in assigned reading? When do they read for their own purposes? Do children inquire into issues and topics they find relevant and appealing? Are reading and language arts skills presented systematically or functionally?

Historical knowledge can inform people's views of the present (Moore, Monaghan, & Hartman, 1997). As this brief comparison between contemporary instruction and progressive recommendations shows, history can produce alternative views of mainstream practices and initiate possible directions for the future. Educators committed to the progressive value of purposeful activity might teach against the grain of dominant practice by incorporating inquiry projects. They might become politically active and advocate progressive educational policies at the local, state, and national levels. To be sure, educators can assess the present with historical standards other than progressive ones. Other historical points of view provide touchstones for viewing the present. Notwithstanding the possibilities of multiple perspectives on a topic, the central lesson of this report is this: Knowing where people have been sheds light on knowing where people might go.

Further analyses of Zirbes's exemplification of progressive reading instruction might set her contributions among those with similar beliefs and principles. To illustrate, foundations of education analyses frequently portray a series of well-known thinkers such as Froebel, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Spencer, Dewey, Hall, and Piaget, to name a few, who articulated progressive philosophical beliefs and guiding principles (Egan, 2002). The fluctuation of these beliefs and principles in the U.S. reading curricula is evident over the years in the approach Laura Zirbes espoused as well as in the language experience (see, e.g., Allen, 1976; Lamoreaux & Lee, 1943), individualized reading (see, e.g., Fader, 1968; Veatch, 1959), and whole language approaches (see, e.g., Edelsky, Altwerger, & Flores, 1991; Goodman, 1986). Additional historical analyses might examine the social, cultural, and political conditions contributing to the emergence and demise of these specific approaches that are grounded in a common ideology.

In Laura Zirbes's 1966 personal statement cited earlier, wherein at age 82 she wrote about herself to a close friend, she included this commentary:

> I am beginning to conclude that education is going through a new and disconcerting *regressive* movement, at the same time that dynamic leadership could be moving things *ahead*. Where is that leadership? What can be done to challenge the young potential leaders whose insights and concerns could lead to a breakthrough and true advance? As for me, I am assumed to be wedded to the past, and am counted out by those who see themselves as innovators even when they are exponents of obsolete ideas. While I *am still a pioneer*...I know that *my* place is on the sidelines after

over 60 years of active involvement. (quoted in Reid, 1993, pp. 310–311; emphases in the original)

After breaking new ground for six decades as a progressive educator, Laura Zirbes rightfully considered herself to be a pioneer. Publicly including her among the ranks of early reading pioneers in this volume is a well-deserved honor.

Reflection Questions

1. What would Zirbes have contributed to the whole language approach to reading instruction that crested in the United States during the 1990s?
2. How would Zirbes react to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001?
3. What other lessons for the future can be generated from this study of Zirbes?
4. Why is Zirbes not better known among today's reading educators?
5. Is there anyone who is enacting an educational role today that is similar to the role Zirbes enacted?

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