Northern Illinois University Document Delivery

ILLiad TN: 277528

Journal Title: Reading Psychology

Volume: 9
Issue: 1
Month/Year: 1988
Pages: 51-57

Article Author: Bob Jerrolds

Article Title: Leaders in Reading Research and instruction: An interview with Ira E. Aaron

Imprint:

Call #: BF456.R2 R34

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LEADERS IN READING RESEARCH AND INSTRUCTION

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AN INTERVIEW WITH IRA E. AARON

By Bob W. Jerrolds
January 7, 1988

Ira E. Aaron (A.B.J. and M.Ed., University of Georgia; Ph.D., University of Minnesota) is today University of Georgia Alumni Foundation Professor Emeritus. Aaron devoted more than 43 years to the profession of education. He was in some kind of leadership position through the 43 years, beginning as a teacher-principal. Ira E. Aaron is nationally and internationally known for thoroughness in scholarship, for effectiveness in teaching, for thoughtfulness and kindness to others in service activities, and for his impeccable integrity in leadership.

Few individuals have ever touched the reading lives of as many people as Aaron through such a variety of professional contributions. His many articles, book chapters, monographs, test reviews, and books have influenced students and teachers for four decades. He has helped to shape the scholarly writings of others through his advisory editorial work with *The Reading Teacher*, the *Journal of Reading*, *Reading Research Quarterly*, and other journals and publishing houses.

For more than 20 years, Aaron has served as consultant and author for parts of nine series of basal readers for one of the most successful

Reading Psychology: An International Quarterly 9:51-57, 1988
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educational publishers in North America. He has authored or co-authored more than 450 books, tests, and other components of basal series. By conservative estimate on a given school day, as many as 60,000 teachers in 42 nations are using materials Aaron helped to develop.

In the area of instruction, Aaron has been a classroom teacher; has taught children in a one-to-one situation in a reading clinic; has taught Educational Administration, Educational Psychology, Statistics, a host of Reading Education courses, and others. He led in the development of the M.Ed., Ed.S., Ed.D., and Ph.D. programs in Reading Education at the University of Georgia. He has taught approximately 10,000 pre- and in-service teachers at the University of Georgia.

Aaron has made enduring contributions to his professional organizations. He has served on any number of committees for the various reading associations; has served as advisor for various state, national, and international agencies; and through one four-year period, he made 79 presentations in most of the states and some foreign countries. He was president of the International Reading Association and President/Secretary of the Reading Hall of Fame. (Of the latter, he says, "It is more secretarying than presiding.")

Perhaps Aaron's most far-reaching contribution has been through teacher educators he has trained. He has served as major professor for approximately 80 persons who received their doctorate. Today, these men and women serve as professors of reading education, deans of education, state department of education personnel, school superintendents, and in a number of other important capacities.

Ira E. Aaron's publications, teaching, and service to the field of reading have made him truly worthy of his reputation as one of the most influential reading educators in the world.

I know that your early education was in journalism and educational administration, how or why did you move into reading education?

That question is not an easy one for me to answer. A lot of what I have been involved in grew out of what, to me at the time, seemed to be appropriate or needed. My plans to become a journalist unraveled as we approached World War II. I taught English and mathematics for a half year, until I went into the service, since no one wanted to employ in journalism a person destined soon for military duty. I enjoyed the teaching experience. For a part of my service time, I was involved in administrative activities as a Security and Intelligence Officer in what then was known as the Army Air Corps. I liked that, too.

After the end of my service, I decided to move toward a career in school administration. As a teaching-principal in a small school, I was the only person who had been asked to run for the system school superintendent's position. At that same time I was offered a job that combined education and journalism. That job brought me to the University of Georgia to edit materials of the Bureau of Educational Studies and Field Services. On the third day of my new job, my assignment was abruptly changed when someone was needed to teach two large overflow sections of undergraduate Educational Psychology. So ended my fulltime work in journalism--after three days.

Now to respond more directly to your question. I realized from my teaching experience that one of the most influential factors in school success was ability to read. I also realized that I needed to know more about the teaching of reading. Though my doctoral study was in the area of Educational Psychology, it included courses in the area of Reading, and my dissertation was codirected by Guy Bond, who was at that time one of the leaders in Reading. When I returned to the University of Georgia, I served as Director of the Bureau of Educational Studies and Field Services and taught Educational Psychology courses. I also taught an occasional Reading methodology course. At that time, we only had two graduate courses in Reading.

I guess that I saw a need for expanded offerings in Reading and for the development of a Reading Clinic. In 1956, I believe it was, I moved into the Reading area, with occasional work in teaching Educational Psychology courses. I've stuck with the Reading area since.

Why did I get into the area of Reading? I'm not exactly sure--but I am glad that I did. I must add, though, that I usually like what I am doing--and probably would have been equally happy working in journalism or in administration.

In looking at the records at the University of Georgia, it appears that you have served as major professor for about 80 people who completed their doctorates. As you consider doctoral programs across the country, what changes would you like to see put into place?

I'm not sure that I could mention any change that some doctoral program does not already include. Instead, I'll mention a few things I would want included in any program.

All doctoral candidates in Reading need to be exposed to different views where major conflicting ideas exist in Reading, and as mature professionals, they should draw their own conclusions. I would hope, further, that their professors would recognize and help students to recognize that what the reading teacher does is much more important than the approach label, such as basal, whole language, or individualized reading, that might be applied to the approach or approaches being used. I would want a doctoral candidate to have some knowledge of reading methods at all levels--elementary, secondary, college, and adult levels--though he or she may concentrate at one or two levels. Finally, doctoral candidates should learn as much as possible within the confines of their programs about evaluating progress in reading achievement. This latter may be one of the weakest areas in doctoral programs.

You have visited and helped to evaluate many programs tha prepare reading teachers. What changes do you think w should make in the preparation of reading teachers?

We've come a long way in improving teacher preparation in the area o Reading. Much of what is being done is excellent. However, what course or a preparation program offers rests heavily on the perso teaching it. I'd like for all reading teachers to have more opportunitie to see good reading teachers in action. They need to see demonstration of the major approaches to the teaching of reading. Well-prepare videotapes would help to fill this need. Teachers-in-preparation als need thorough attention to the particular approach being used in th system where they are likely to teach.

I'd also like for all Reading methods instructors to know somethin about children's literature, so adequate attention is given to usin children's books as an important part of the reading program. Thos who teach content area Reading also need to have some knowledg about children's books that can be used in subject matter classes.

I know that you have one of the most extensive privat collections of children's literature in the country, and have heard you say that children's literature throug bifocals is somewhat different than through the eyes o children. From either perspective, what do you wish writer for children would do that they aren't doing or what ar they doing that you wish they wouldn't?

Actually, I think some excellent children's books are being publishe today, not only in the United States but in other English-speakin countries. And in the last year or two, more children's books publishe in other countries are coming to the United States. I've seen mor books from Canada, England, and New Zealand being published also i the United States just recently. For example, the books of Margare Mahy, New Zealand's award-winning children's book author, ar being published by a publisher in the United States.

I would like to see interestingly written informational books being published to a greater extent. Certainly there are some; we need more. The 1988 Newbery winner falls into this category. These could be used in conjunction with instruction in different subject areas, especially in social studies and science, as well as for recreational reading.

I like the way some authors, such as Cynthia Voigt, Betsy Byars, Beverly Cleary, and Lois Lowry, have been writing several books about the same characters. For example, Cynthia Voigt has written six books in which Tillerman family members appear.

Back to what you said about my collection of children's books. It's not that great. It includes, for the most part, fairly recent books--not a lot of the many good ones of the past. A better way to put it would be that very few individuals spend as much money on children's books as I do! I do have what probably is the only collection anywhere of recent prize-winning children's books from other English-speaking countries. These are the equivalent of our Caldecott and Newbery award books. Two of us are studying them as a part of a research project. As you would guess, analyzing children's books is not as enjoyable as just reading them. I read a lot of children's books and many best-seller adult books. The quality of children's books is superior to that of adult books.

In your career you have been witness to a number of criticisms of education. Which in your opinion was the most justified and the most unjustified?

An ever-present criticism through the years that has irritated me is that Education methods courses--including those in Reading--have no substance. Some report or individual with no evidence comes forth almost yearly with this accusation. The criticism may be valid for an occasional methods course, but from my observations, it is a grossly unfair attack. Certainly in any area you want to mention, you will find at least a few college/university teachers who gloss over what they should be teaching.

Probably one of the most valid recent criticisms is that much more attention needs to be given to improving adult literacy. I do question some of the figures cited for the number of people in the United States who are illiterate, but I certainly agree that more attention needs to be focused on adult literacy. Some of the articles and books on adult literacy (or adult illiteracy) have offered some possible solutions to the problem. To my way of thinking, we need a greater emphasis on coalitions of education, business, government, and the media to attack this major problem.

We are hearing a lot of debate these days on the role that large universities should play in teacher education. What changes in large universities would improve teaching in reading education (as well as in other) programs?

We've emphasized research and publication so much that we've forced young faculty members to turn their major attention to meeting university demands for research and publication, possibly to the neglect of instruction and service. We place a tremendous amount of pressure on these young faculty members. We force them to give their major attention to their own survival, when a lot of their attention ought to be focused on their students. Promotion and tenure requirements should lean more heavily upon instruction and less on numbers of publications in "good" journals.

This pressure has led in a lot of instances to the publication of what sometimes are called "potboilers". Researchers are forced to look at problems that have quick payoffs in the way of publication, lest the researcher be accused of not using his or her research time effectively. An occasional article gives the appearance of being written before the pot boiled. The fault lies at least as much--maybe more--with those of us who let the promotion and tenure requirements grow to what they are. We've contributed heavily to the development of an attitude on the part of a lot of people that gives greater weight to what projects will lead to quick publication than to what projects will lead to greater knowledge about Reading and Reading instruction.