Ira E. Aaron: A Brief Biography

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A national leader in the field of reading education, Ira Aaron earned both his MEd and ABJ at The University of Georgia. He later received his doctorate at the University of Minnesota (1954). Dr. Aaron originally prepared for a career as a journalist but became a teacher, school administrator, teacher educator, and researcher. He served as president of the International Reading Association (IRA) from 1983-84, is a member of the IRA Reading Hall of Fame, and received the IRA William S. Gray Citation of Merit in 1994.

Dr. Aaron served on the faculty of the College of Education at the University of Georgia for 37 years (1948-1985) where he helped begin the reading education program. He was also founder of the university's reading clinic, which remains one of the oldest continuously running reading clinics in the United States. The clinic opened in 1956 and offers tutoring for first grade children through high school students. After he retired, Dr. Aaron started to co-review award-winning children's books from around the world. He currently resides in Athens, Georgia.

The University of Georgia's College of Education Ira E. Aaron Award for Teaching Excellence and Collegiality (formerly known as the COE Faculty Award for Teaching Excellence) was established in 1999. This award recognizes outstanding teaching by faculty members who have set an example for collegiality. To honor Dr. Aaron and the outstanding mentoring he gave so many students for over 35 years in the College of Education, a scholarship fund was begun by Dr. Sylvia McCoy Hutchinson and others. The purpose of the Ira E. Aaron International Scholarship Fund is to provide undergraduate and graduate students an opportunity to study abroad through either a traditional study abroad program or a student exchange with an international university. Dr. Aaron was named one of 100 Distinguished Alumni by the University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) in 2006.

In the article "Leaders in Reading Research and Instruction: An Interview with Ira E. Aaron" by Bob Jerrolds, Dr. Aaron discussed how he moved from

journalism to reading education, the changes he would like to make in doctoral programs in reading, the preparation of reading teachers, the importance of children's literature, and what he sees as a misplaced emphasis on research and publication over teaching.

Dr. Aaron's remarks are followed by a reflection by Timothy Rasinki.

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My Experiences As A Literacy Educator

Ira E. Aaron

A.B. Herr Award 1984
Albert J. Mazurkiewicz Special Services Award 1985

Professor Emeritus
University of Georgia
College Reading Association
November 1994

Early Influences

My preparation as a reading educator may seem strange. After completing a degree in journalism in 1941, I spent approximately four years in the United States Army Air Corps. Most of that time was devoted to security and intelligence duties. When I came out of the service soon after the end of World War II, jobs in journalism were not very plentiful, at least not in locations where I wanted to live. After an unsuccessful attempt to buy the small weekly newspaper in my home county, I headed back to college at the University of Georgia.

After earning a master's degree in Educational Administration, I became a teaching principal in my home county with the intention of running for the elective office of county school superintendent. However, just before the election, in which there would have been no opposition, I accepted a position in the College of Education at the University of Georgia. Although I was hired in the Bureau of Educational Studies and Field Services to edit educational publications, my full-time editing responsibilities lasted only three days. I was then assigned to teach two large overflow sections of undergraduate Educational Psychology. After a year and a half of teaching, editing, and working on school system surveys, I went to the University of Minnesota to work toward a doctorate in Educational Psychology.

After earning my PhD in 1954, I returned to the University of Georgia as director of the Bureau of Educational Studies and Field Services and also taught Educational Psychology courses. At that time, the University of Georgia, like most institutions, gave no attention to reading as a field of study. There was only one

Reprinted from *Generation of Literacy*, pp. 53-57, by W. M. Linek & E. G. Sturtevant, &, Eds., 1995, Commerce, TX: College Reading Association.

reading methods course, which was offered two or three times per year. In 1956, we developed a reading clinic, staffed by a one-third time graduate assistant plus a part of my assigned time. We soon added a diagnostic and corrective reading course. Gradually, we developed master's and then doctoral programs. The faculty grew to more than a dozen plus a good number of graduate assistants. Much of my time and effort during that growing period went into program building.

Professional Influences

My earlier experiences certainly influenced what came later. The greatest influence in my University of Minnesota studies came from contacts with Guy L. Bond, who co-advised my dissertation and taught me in several courses. In the late 1940s, Dr. Bond was one of few who were writing college texts on elementary, secondary, and remedial reading. Most of my early background in reading came from his courses and textbooks. At Minnesota, I also was thoroughly grounded in statistics, research methodology, and educational measurement. These experiences gave me some of the knowledge I needed to direct the research of doctoral students. Preparing for a career in the area of reading by earning a doctorate in Educational Psychology was not unusual at the time. Most of the top leaders in the field of reading in the 1940s and the 1950s had doctorates in some branch of psychology.

For many years, I headed the doctoral seminar at the University of Georgia for reading education candidates and twice a year taught a course on "Critique of Reading Literature." These responsibilities caused me to attempt to keep abreast of everything—good, bad, or indifferent—happening in the field.

Changes and Issues Over the Years

In the late 1940's and for several decades following, most elementary reading instructional programs leaned heavily upon basal readers. Most of the early nationally-known leaders in reading were associated with some basal series and also were involved in preparation programs in reading.

Instructional approaches and materials proposed for use since the 1940's have been numerous. Some of these approaches might be thought of as total whereas others were partial or supplementary approaches. A few of these flashed briefly across the academic horizon and then quickly faded away, with little to show that they had been around. The Initial Teaching Alphabet (both British and American versions) is an example of this. Some, such as the Language Experience and Individualized Reading approaches, left lasting, good changes in many instructional programs. But throughout, the basal series kept moving along, but at a slower pace. We've also had a variety of patterns of organization for reading instruction, running the gamut from whole class, to three or more subgroups, to cross-class, to cross-grade, to grouping by invitation, and so on.

Over the past 50 years, various attacks have been launched against almost all approaches—and many individual practices—used in reading instruction. Almost all approaches have been supported strongly by some and condemned by others. One of the earliest battles I recall was that between specific basal programs (mostly Scott Foresman, because of its wide use) and a program with a heavy emphasis on phonics (Economy). Then we had Language Experience vs. basals and Individualized Reading vs. basals. Now we have Literature-Based and Whole Language vs. basals. If you've studied recently published basals and the teachers' editions accompanying them, you have seen the influences of the Whole Language movement.

All instructional approaches (or philosophies) have strengths and possible weaknesses. Let's look at Whole Language. Among the positive factors are the focus on children; it's child-centered. It depends heavily upon the use of children's library books; it advocates the use of informal assessment procedures. Possible weaknesses are that skill instruction may be neglected and too much whole-class instruction may be used. These observations come from reading descriptions of Whole Language programs in professional journals and from hearing reports given at professional meetings. For example, ERIC Clearing House's recently published *Whole Language: The Debate* (Smith, 1994) contains articles by supporters and critics of whole language.

Many characteristics of Jan Veatch's Individualized Reading and Whole Language are similar. I was in the general session at an early International Reading Association (1960) annual meeting in New York when Jan debated the issues with Paul Witty and Emmett Betts. The packed audience supported Jan, whether or not they were in total agreement with her, because of her fortitude in facing off against two reading giants.

Issues have a way of recurring from time to time. A good example, not limited to the field of reading, is the recently published *The Bell Curve*, written by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray (1994). When the topic is intelligence and class structure, it's not surprising that it generates more emotion than reason. A quick reading of parts of the book will show that some of the people discussing the book have not read it. Data similar to those on which the book is based were available years ago. I encountered studies much like those presented in the book in individual differences courses I took in the first quarter of my doctoral study. The interpretations, however, are somewhat different. Reactions to the book range from strong support to condemnation of the authors' viewpoints. Reactions to some reading approaches and practices reveal similar contrasting views.

Though teachers have used trade books in their reading programs in the past, many more teachers today are using them as vital parts of their reading instructional programs, regardless of the main approach or philosophy guiding the program. Many more children's books are available today. Each year, in

the United States, approximately 5,000 new titles are published, double the number published 12 to 15 years ago. In addition, many more children's books from other English-speaking countries are coming into the United States today as compared with just a few years ago. Children's books should be a vital part of any reading instructional program, regardless of what the approach happens to be called.

In Closing

Today's teachers of reading know how to teach reading more effectively and know more about children's literature than the teachers who came before them. Issues and approaches will come and go—and some will return in different form. Well-prepared, caring teachers can, in the long run, be depended upon to make the right decisions about reading instruction.

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Reflection on Ira Aaron

Timothy V. Rasinski

My first meeting with Dr. Ira Aaron came during the 1985 IRA convention in New Orleans. I was finishing my doctoral studies at Ohio State and was desperately seeking employment. I was lucky enough to make the short list for a job at the University of Georgia and was scheduled for a breakfast meeting with Dr. Ira at the Marriott. Well I must have spent too much time on Bourbon Street the night before because instead of going to the Marriott I went to the Holiday Inn. By the time I discovered my mistake and made it to the right hotel I was a half hour late. "You dope," I thought to myself "you just blew yourself out of that job."

Yet, when I finally caught up with Dr. Ira, I learned why one of my own mentors, Martha King, called him one of the "true gentlemen" of our profession. His hospitality and graciousness were truly welcomed by this klutz of a graduate student!

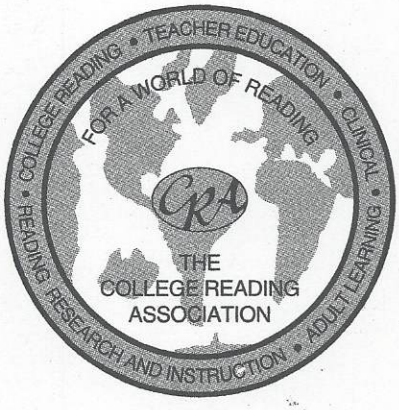
I don't know how it happened, but I was offered a position at Georgia and I accepted it. By this time Dr. Ira had retired from the university. Still, over the next several years I had many opportunities to chat with Dr. Ira—usually over coffee in the Aderhold Hall lunchroom, but also at lunch at the Georgia Center, at UGA football games to which he invited me, or at meetings of the Northeast Georgia Chapter of the IRA.

I always enjoyed talking with Dr. Ira. He could converse as easily about the newest trade books for children or the latest research in RRQ as he could about the prospects for the Bulldogs in the upcoming football season. More important though, he always seemed very interested in me, a lowly assistant professor, and my work.

In Dr. Ira's paper he says that "Well-prepared, caring teachers can, in the long run, be depended upon to make the right decisions about reading instruction." I think he's right on target in that statement. Moreover, I think that that statement provides an accurate description of Dr. Ira himself. He is a professional teacher, always prepared and always current, who cared about his university students and about the children of Georgia and the nation.

The College Reading Association Legacy: A Celebration of Fifty Years of Literacy Leadership

Volume I



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ISBN 1-883604-35-4

Cover design by Crystal Britton, student at Texas A&M University-Commerce.