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Jeanne S. Chall (1921–1999): An Appreciation

Jeanne S. Chall passed away on November 27, 1999, shortly after finishing her last book. Those of us who knew her could not suppress a knowing smile underneath our sorrow, for we knew how important her work was to her, and to us.

In an appreciation of someone's life, one can take a number of routes. One can recount the facts, and one can tell the person's story. Jeanne's story was an immigrant story. She was born in Poland in 1921. She came to the United States at age 7, speaking Yiddish. She learned English in the New York City public schools. She helped her mother learn English so that she could pass the citizenship exam, her first job as a teacher. Jeanne went on to graduate cum laude with a BS in education from City College. She was the first in her family to earn a college degree. She later earned both a master's degree (1947) and a doctorate (1952) from Ohio State University, under Edgar Dale. Her master's thesis was on readability, and led to the Dale-Chall Readability Formula, a measure of text difficulty still among the most widely used formulas (Jeanne revised it in 1995).

Jeanne went on to write numerous books and monographs, including *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967) and *Stages of Reading Development* (1996). She was a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education for many years. She received nearly every honor that a professor of education could get. She was a fellow of the American Psychological Association, and a member of the National Academy of Education and the Reading Hall of Fame. She received the Edward L. Thorndike Award from the American Psychological Association for distinguished psychological contributions to education, the American Educational Research Association's award for significant contributions to educational research, and the Samuel T. Orton Award from the Orton Dyslexia Society.

All of these facts are true, but they are not the measure of the person. Jeanne's life was intricately tied to her definition of what it was to be a scholar in education. Jeanne was more than a researcher. She conducted educational research, to be sure. Her greatness, however, was her ability to situate the problem she was working on in a larger picture, and to use as broad a lens as possible, across a variety of disciplines, on that problem.

There are those who pursue a question in reading slowly and methodically, with each study adding another piece to a puzzle. This was not Jeanne's way. Edgar Dale advised her to have more than one area of research, advise that Jeanne took enthusiastically. There are few corners of the literacy world that Jeanne has not touched through her scholarship. Her work was far-reaching. Throughout all of her research, she never lost her compassion for children who have difficulty learning to read. It was her compassion that motivated her research and fired up her enthusiasm.

The Great Debate and Beyond

Consider her most famous work, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967). It began as a review of research in beginning reading. Then, as now, there was a considerable public debate about the role of phonics in beginning reading instruction. Jeanne received funding from the Carnegie Foundation and spent over 2 years of work on this project. She not only reviewed the research literature on the effectiveness of phonics instruction, but also visited classrooms to examine what various kinds of instruction looked like, did a close textual examination of both mainstream and new approaches to beginning reading, and interviewed proponents of various programs. Jeanne included in her review not only phonics programs, but also many of the innovative programs of the times, including programs written especially for inner-city children ("The Bank Street Readers") and even novelties like the "talking typewriter." Her conclusion, that early and systematic instruction in phonics leads to better achievement than later and less systematic approaches, has held up, and been reconfirmed repeatedly (e.g., Adams, 1990; Anderson, Hiebert, Wilkinson, & Scott, 1985; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Consider also her contribution to the Cooperative Research Program in First-Grade Reading Instruction (Bond & Dykstra, 1967/1997). Most of the 29 studies in that program compared different instructional approaches through "horse race" studies, in which two or more methods were compared on a variety of measures. Chall and Feldmann (1966) was one of the few studies to do classroom observations, since Jeanne wanted to know whether, in fact, teachers were using the method they professed to use. They found that teachers varied considerably from the method they said they were using, and, regardless of the approach that they said they were using, the amount of phonics instruction correlated strongly with the achievement of the children. The use of observations to examine fidelity to instructional method is now commonplace (e.g., Foorman, Fletcher, Francis, Schatschneider, & Mehta, 1998) as is examining the relation between observed teaching patterns and achievement (e.g., Evans & Carr, 1985), but in 1966, this was prescient. It was also sensible, in that this is how instructional research should be done. Chall and Feldman's (1966) study, among others, helped us move away from an emphasis on "method" to an understanding of how instructional practices affect achievement.

In both of these projects, Jeanne's method was to gather all the available evidence and look at it from one angle and then another, until she could perceive an overall pattern. She went beyond the original question using as broad a lens as possible, so she could not only see her data, but also see the influences on her data, to understand why she found what she found. This makes *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* a classic, a book that every would-be educational scholar should read to understand how educational research is done.

Of course, Jeanne's conclusion was not without controversy, in the fractious realm of reading education (e.g., Grundin, 1994; Taylor, 1998). The basic

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result has been strengthened repeatedly over the years to the point where it should be unassailable. In the political world of reading education, however, this is not the case. The "great debate" which initially occasioned Chall's book continues, with even more force.

In her last years, Jeanne started to examine the trends that underlie the debates and that have given them such continued life. In a 1992 article in *Teachers College Record*, she suggested that the current whole language/phonics dispute is representative of a larger schism in basic views of how we view teaching. She argued that we have vacillated between rational and romantic views of education. (She used the word "romantic," but did not use the word "rational." I think it captures her view, though.) Proponents of the rational view consider the purpose of teaching to be to increase achievement and the purpose of educational research to discover methods of doing this better. "Mastery learning," "effective instruction," and "direct instruction" are manifestations of this view. In contrast, romantic views of instruction tend to view the purpose of teaching as to help the self-actualization of the child. "Child-centered learning," "whole language," and "developmentally appropriate instruction" are manifestations of this view. This argument was expanded in her last book, entitled *The Academic Achievement Challenge: What Really Works in Classrooms* (2000), the last book she finished before she passed away.

Jeanne said that, in reading, this romantic view "is imbued with love and hope. This view holds that a child learns to read as naturally as he learns to speak, if only we encourage him to use his language and his cognition when he reads interesting books." "But sadly," she wrote, "this view has been proven by research, theory, and practice to be less effective than a code-emphasis, particularly for children who are at risk for learning to read." (Chall, 1992, p. 326).

Even with her emphasis on learning the code, she was equally uncomfortable with extremes in teaching phonics. In her own practice, as director of the Harvard Reading Laboratory, she emphasized not "hitting the child over the head" with skill instruction and the importance of balancing skill instruction with practice in reading connected text. This theme can be found throughout *The Great Debate* and her other works.

Stages of Reading Development

Jeanne's other major contribution was her stage model of reading. The germ for this idea came from her observation in *The Great Debate* that code-emphasis programs tended to have stronger effects on comprehension later in first grade and in second grade than they did early in first grade.

Why would effects on comprehension be stronger in second grade than in first? One answer might be that reading develops in stages. In beginning reading, one can discern three stages. There would seem to be a pre-reading stage in which children gain the knowledge and skills needed for formal reading instruction. This used to be called "reading readiness," but more current work, especially following Teale and Sulzby (1986) would term this "emergent literacy" (see Adams, 1990). There seems to be an initial learning stage, in which children learn about words, letters, and sounds. Chall felt that phonics instruction was most useful in this stage. This is followed by a stage in which children develop automaticity of word recognition and skill in using context to confirm their identifications of words.

Thinking beyond beginning reading, Chall read other stage theorists, as diverse as Piaget (1990), Biemiller (1970) and Perry (1970). Based on her understanding of the development of word identification and the development of children's thinking, she suggested that children go through six stages as they progress as readers:

Stage 0—Prereading (Ages birth to six, before formal reading instruction begins[1]). In this stage, the child learns what is needed to be ready to benefit from formal reading instruction, including phonological awareness, print concept, alphabet knowledge, and language knowledge.

Stage 1—Decoding (Beginning Grade 1). In this stage, the student begins to learn about sound-symbol correspondences. The student's reading performance here is "glued to the text," in that she or he is trying to carefully reproduce what the text says.

Stage 2—Confirmation and Fluency (End of Grade 1 to end of Grade 3). In this stage, the student learns both to decode words fluently and accurately, as well as to orchestrate the use of syntactic and semantic information in text to confirm their word recognition.

Stage 3—Learning the New (Single Viewpoint) (Grade 4 to Grade 8). In this stage, children learn to use their reading skill to extract information from text. At this point, children begin to be expected to learn from content area textbooks, with increasingly less teacher guidance.

Stage 4—Multiple Viewpoints (High School to early college). In this stage, the child synthesizes information from different texts, acknowledging multiple viewpoints, but still keeping them separate from one's own.

Stage 5—A World View (Late college to graduate school). In this stage, adults develop the selectivity to weigh information and selectively add information from text to their world view.

This model was developed partly to explain how reading develops and partly to explain what different instruction is needed at different stages. She suggested, for example, that in the emergent literacy stage, children need immersion in print, as might be found in a whole language kindergarten (see Stahl & Miller, 1989), but at the decoding stage, most children need more systematic instruction in phonics. By the Confirmation and Fluency stage, children need more practice in reading connected text and in using the letter-sound correspondences taught in Stage 1.

A number of authors have used stage notions since Chall. Ehri (1995) has used stage notions to discuss the development of word recognition. A number of authors have used stage notions to discuss spelling development (e.g., Bear, Templeton, Invernizzi, & Johnston, 1996).

Jeanne used this model to look at the "fourth grade slump," or the common observation that some children begin to experience an unexpected reading failure at the end of third grade or the beginning of fourth grade. Chall, Jacobs, and Baldwin (1990) confirmed a widening gap at that grade, and attributed it to the increased conceptual demands of the reading material at that level. They found a widening gap in vocabulary knowledge, which reflected concept knowledge, which led to differences in reading comprehension ability. They suggested instruction in vocabulary, from the early grades onward, as well as making sure that children were able to read fluently before they left the primary grades.

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A Seriousness of Purpose

Underlying all of this is Jeanne's conviction of the importance of good teaching and the importance of learning to read. Perhaps this comes back to her own story, having come to the U.S. without English skills and how important it was to her to learn to read. Regardless, she worried about children, especially poor children, who had difficulties learning to read. She had little patience with those who put their own political or personal agendas ahead of the interests of children.

Jeanne saw herself as a teacher. She founded the Harvard Reading Laboratory and directed it from 1966 until her retirement. She also published a number of diagnostic assessments, most notably the Diagnostic Assessment of Reading/Trial Teaching Strategies, or DARTTS (Chall & Roswell, 1992) as well as a flurry of books for teachers. The clinical work nourished her and made her feel connected to teaching and learning. Her eyes would light up as a child got an insight about reading, or was able to read a story independently, or simply just said something cute.

Jeanne was also a teacher to her graduate students, and to the field of reading education. Her work was written clearly, drafted and re-drafted until it was clear, so that an intelligent layman, not just a person in the same academic niche, could understand it. She gave us content, her broad knowledge of research in reading. But she also gave us a model of what a scholar should be, and for that, I, among many others, am most grateful.

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Note

[1] I use Chall's age suggestions. Current trends have pushed these ages back a bit, so that children usually begin reading instruction in kindergarten; content reading instruction in 3rd, not 4th grade; and so forth.

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This year, President-Elect Andrew Porter hopes to form many of the committees before the annual meeting in Seattle. He urges members to supply names, including their own, if they are interested in serving on a committee. Please send a resume if volunteering (or a statement about qualifications if nominating someone else) and state which committees are of interest.

He also welcomes suggestions about existing AERA programs and possible new initiatives. Please write to him at: **AERA, 1230 17th Street, NW, Washington, DC 20036-3078**

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