Ira E. Aaron: A Qualitative Case Study of a Career History

Deborah Dillon

What makes people stand out in the field of education—allowing them to be head and shoulders above all others in their area of expertise? Is it their ability to teach, their leadership qualities, their organization, their intellect, their humanism, or perhaps their charisma? Lortie (1975) says that most outstanding educators are remembered for their ability to "induce learning and love of learning and elicit positive feelings and high effort while maintaining discipline" (p. 118). After interviewing a great number of teachers, Lortie observed that "charisma," "the gift of grace," and "interpersonal and leadership skills" were considered important qualities for educators (p. 133).

The purpose of recording this career history was to further define the qualities of an outstanding teacher by exploring one individual teacher's life—a teacher viewed by his colleagues and students as outstanding in the field of reading education. Dr. Ira Edward Aaron's career exemplifed the many contributions and achievements associated with a giant in the field.

Methods of Research

Method

Informal talks and interviews were used to collect data about Dr. Aaron's life. Patton's (1980) general interview guide approach was employed—I provided Dr. Aaron with general topics, questions, and issues regarding his life, and then allowed him to talk spontaneously. The interviews were taped and then transcribed. I made observer comments about the interviews immediately after they were conducted. These notes included comments about the setting and general atmosphere of the interviews. Key informants were asked to supply personal insight into Dr. Aaron's life, and several of Dr. Aaron's personal documents were reviewed. This triangulated method of data collection helped to establish reliability, while validity was established by the kinds of questions asked of Dr. Aaron and the truthfulness of the obtained answers. Furthermore, rapport and trust had been established in previous interactions between Dr. Aaron and the writer, adding further validity to the data.

Setting and Procedure

The interviews were conducted

primarily in Dr. Aaron's private office at the University of Georgia. The interviews were conducted in two sessions—one session was 90 minutes long and the other was 60 minutes long.

Time Line

The tape interviews were transcribed and then examined to identify career events, which evolved into categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that guide the organization of events for Dr. Aaron's partial career history. I refer to it as partial, because I was unable to research a large amount of Dr. Aaron's life. Time constraints also limited this study.

The Findings

Background

Dr. Aaron, fondly referred to as "Dr. Ira," is indeed a kindly father figure for faculty and students alike. His fatherly image is seen in his appearance and, to a large extent, in his actions. He is highly respected by students and colleagues. His image exemplifies a professional and reserved manner—complete with dark, formal suits and matching shirts, ties, and shoes.

Dr. Ira is by nature quiet and shy, listening rather than speaking on many occasions. But catch him at his forte, reading research, children's literature, or mentioning places he has visited, people he has met, and things he has learned, and his conversation is animated. A sensitive side of Dr. Aaron is reflected in the many generous and kind things he has done for people. Just recently, Dr. Aaron saw a graduate student feeling discouraged about a set back concerning a dissertation. He took the student out for a good meal and some personal cheering up and wise counseling. This action was typical of his caring nature.

Early Life

Dr. Aaron's roots are in Jenkins County, Georgia. This rural community was a closely knit group of people during the years of his youth. His father was a businessman who owned a farm with a large layout of land, a saw mill, a cotton gin, a grist mill, and a store. Dr. Aaron described him as hard working—perhaps working at the various businesses to stay away from farm work (which he apparently did not like). Dr. Ira's mother, also described as hard working, competently ran the family home and cooked for their many guests.

Aaron: It's hard to explain exactly how large the crowd got—there were 7 children and a very large house and people were just dropping in and might stay overnight. You'd end up with, maybe 11 the next morning for breakfast—well, more than that, because you'd have 7, 8, 9; you might even have around 10, plus and visitors that stayed overnight. It

was sort of a central place—for instance, when we ate breakfast you'd come in at whatever time—almost like a restaurant. You'd just go in, except you didn't pay the check (Dr. Ira laughs). There were just piles of people around . . .

One particular aunt seemed to play a large part in his upbringing. The aunt's home was only a short distance from Dr. Ira's house, and she had the only library in the countryside. Dr. Aaron read her books and also took music lessons from his aunt, a musician.

Aaron: It was interesting when my dad's brother married my mother's sister—they had no children. Of course, our house was just loaded with them, and we only lived a half of a mile away. My aunt had the only library in that entire countryside, I suspect. She's the only person I knew who bought books (Dr. Ira chuckles).

Dillon: Did she get you interested in reading?

Aaron: Well, I probably would have been interested anyhow, but I read her books because she had books. She also was a musician and took it out on the children.

Dillon: Now, someone told me that you used to play the violin?

Aaron: Oh, not very well, I used to play the piano for a time—I put the violin on top the piano! I played the clarinet also, but not well . . . that was so I could go on the band trips in college (Dr. Aaron chuckles). That's it—I haven't leaned on a piano in 20 years, and the violin, I guess it's at my step-mother's house.

Dr. Aaron confessed that he didn't work much around the farm, although he mentioned picking cotton for one whole day—an experience that convinced him that he wasn't going to stay down on the farm. Instead he began to pursue his education, beginning school two years earlier than most children in a most unusual way.

Aaron: It [the school] was about a quarter of a mile from home and I just ran up the hill, and they decided to let me stay (he laughs).

Dillon: You really wanted to go to school?

Aaron: Well, that's where the other people were.

The school itself had 5 or 6 rooms for the elementary grades, with the first grade in one room and the second and third grades in another. Dr. Aaron was admittedly "studiously inclined," and "picked up more books and read them more frequently than most." There were 2 or 3 children in the class who were on a higher intellectual plateau than the others—Dr. Aaron being one of these. By being in the "top group," as he referred to it, he was called on by his peers to help them solve their academic problems.

College and Beginning Career

Dr. Aaron encountered a few challenging teachers in high school but still graduated at the early age of 15 and then ventured on to college for two years at Georgia Southern. His father tried to influence his career plans, but various other factors shaped his life in unusual ways.

Aaron: . . . in college I did not know or didn't want to go in the direction that I guess my dad wanted me to go in. . . . He had a brother who was a well-known medical doctor and the person I was named after. He was interested in my going to college, provided I became a medical doctor. . . . I decided my sophomore year to stay out a year and during that time a principal of a local country school became ill and I got slammed into

his place, and the kids were just about as old as I was! But I worked as the principal and taught school also, for the year. It was then, after two years of college, that I decided that I would not teach. When I went back to college, I decided to become a journalist. So I came here (University of Georgia) and I was still about the right age because I'd finished high school at fifteen. I went to the journalism school for a couple of years and would have gone on in journalism had the war not come about. I took a teaching job back home as I waited to be called into the service and into officer training. I only made a pittance—maybe $75 a month.

Dr. Ira served in various locations during his years in the military but eventually ended up in Alaska, in cryptographic security. After his stint in the service, Dr. Aaron came back to Georgia. He continued his education at the University of Georgia and received a master's degree in educational administration.

Aaron: I went into educational administration, and the reason behind this was that I was supposed to go back to my home county to become the county superintendent. But I had impressed somebody here at the University with the ability to write when I was in courses here and got the offer of the job [editing in the College of Education, the Bureau of Educational Studies] and accepted it.

Dr. Ira edited for just *two years*, and when large numbers of students registered for classes, Dean Aderhold asked him to teach two overflow courses in educational psychology. Dr. Ira confessed that he had taken only two psychology classes. Nevertheless, he taught the courses and "has been at it ever since."

Dr. Aaron continued to teach educational psychology courses and was also employed by the Bureau of Educational Studies and Field Services. He continued in this role until June of 1949, when he ventured north with a General Education Board Fellowship to pursue a Ph.D. in educational psychology at the University of Minnesota.

At Minnesota, Dr. Ira gained additional professional experience while working for Dean Pike and Cyril Hoyt. Along with his coursework in educational psychology, he received a strong background in reading, since such courses were housed in the educational psychology program.

In 1954 with doctorate in hand, he returned to the University of Georgia. At this point he was asked to become the director of the Bureau of Education Studies and to teach educational psychology courses, along with an occasional reading course. Dr. Aaron's career took a major turn, however, when he turned down the opportunity to continue as the director of the Bureau and instead began to build the reading program at the University of Georgia.

Mid Career and Late Career

Dr. Aaron began building the reading program immediately after leaving the Bureau. With Mary Scott's assistance, he started a reading clinic which offered diagnostic and remedial services to individuals with reading problems. Additional reading courses were provided, and the reading program per se emerged with a faculty of five professionals. The program began to expand rapidly and eventually grew to include as many as 14 faculty positions.

Dr. Aaron admits to having some unique personal characteristics. He confesses that he has a mind of his own, yet he is adaptable, despite people's belief that he is rigid. Further, he believes himself to be "directive and organized"—someone who did things "as efficiently as possible." He commented, "I don't mind putting in a lot of effort on things—I do what seems logical at the time—I don't think about it."

The influence of these personal traits seems very evident in Dr. Aaron's life. His service to the reading profession has been enormous, as evidenced by a record that includes (1) presenting at least 225 addresses or workshops, (2) serving on editorial advisory boards, (3) being a member of national assessment teams, (4) writing over 40 publications, (5) serving on 20 college or university committees, (6) supervising over 41 doctoral candidates in reading, and (7) during all of these activities, continuing to teach courses in reading education. He was appointed Alumni Foundation Distinguished Professor on July 1, 1967, and served as department head in 1972-73 and again from 1978-81.

Later Career

Dr. Aaron's later career and, indeed, his life, have been centered around his intense involvement in the International Reading Association (IRA). Dr. Ira's commitment to the organization began at its inception, around 1954. In 1962 he attended his first meeting in San Francisco; after having flown across the country to get there, he had but five minutes to comment on a presentation by Sterl Artley. Later, Dr. Aaron became more involved in IRA and ran unsuccessfully for the board of directors twice.

His involvement with the IRA continued, and then Don Cleland asked Dr. Aaron to set up the last half day of the 1971 IRA convention's major session in Atlantic City. At that half-day session, Dr. Ira spoke to "about 4,000 people" and then broke the group into 14 subgroups with major reading educators as speakers. The success of this session, largely due to Dr. Aaron's organizational skills, brought him additional recognition in the IRA. Then Don Cleland convinced him to run for the board once more, and he won election to the board in 1974. Dr. Aaron's work in IRA led to his becoming the leader of the organization—although being president of IRA was not really one of his goals in life.

Aaron: It was suggested that my name be put into the pot for the presidency and I refused to let it—I just felt that a lot of people would enjoy being president more than I would. So I would never fill out the questionnaire and send it in. I was home on a Saturday afternoon, reading a dissertation, I believe, and I got a call from Ken Goodman before one of the conventions—I've forgotten where it [the convention] was. But they asked me if they could put my name in the pot for the presidency—the committee was meeting at that moment. I asked Ken when I had to make up my mind. I knew the answer, 'cause I'd been on that committee. He said, "Now!" and I said O.K.—but if he had called me back 30 minutes later, I would have said no, and I would have had a much more peaceful three years! (he laughs)

Dr. Aaron won the presidency of IRA, although he refused to campaign for the position. He empathetically stated on several

occasions that he didn't "go into the job for the enjoyment aspet, but to get the job done." Dr. Ira summed up his year as president or IRA as being "one of change." There were many turnovers at IRA headquarters, and Dr. Aaron worked hard to build up the morale and stability of the staff. One of his goals for the year was to build membership, and another was to work on the budget and related financial problems. Overall, Dr. Ira saw his role as president as one of "keeping the boat from rocking—at least while changes were being made." The year kept Dr. Aaron extremely busy with travels near and far. Still he managed to maintain his responsibilities as a teacher, a faculty member, and an advisor. Dr. Aaron has some lasting memories of his term as IRA president.

Aaron: Reactions? I met a lot of people, I traveled a lot, I made too many speeches, and went to too many conferences! . . . The most enjoyable situation I ran into was when an elementary youngster came running up to me at a literacy celebration in Tucson and wanted to know if I was Johnny Bench, the baseball player. Since I was in the presence of someone I knew, I had to say, "Sorry, I'm just a fan of his" (he laughs).

After concluding our conversation about IRA, I asked Dr. Aaron to share several observations on the field of reading in general (i.e., what changes he has observed over the years and what topics might be emphasized or explored in the future).

Aaron: I think I've seen more of an emphasis in recent years on comprehension, as opposed to the earlier emphasis on decoding. All along, the goal was comprehension, but in the earlier days more attention was given to decoding skills. Now there has certainly been an increase in, and more attention paid to, higher level comprehension skills as opposed to literal comprehension skills.

Dillon: What do you attribute this to?

Aaron: I think from much of the research that came out, but I suspect that you could give Delores Durkin as much credit as any, *and* she happens to work as part of the Center for the Study of Reading. Her articles are readable and they cause people to talk and think. Jeanne Chall has had an influence, too, because of the studies she has done which basically say that more of an emphasis should be put on decoding—a heavy phonics emphasis was recommended in the recent commission report and Chall was one of the people who was on that committee.

I asked Dr. Ira what changes he had seen at the state level here in Georgia. He responded that he felt there was a time when the university people and the public school and state department personnel worked together more closely. He attributes the great distance in this relationship at present to the national and international commitments we [university people] have.

Aaron: I'd say in the late 50's through the 60's we had a very close relationship with the public schools —we worked with the curriculum directors before we began to have reading specialists. The curriculum directors worked with the administrator—there was a solid relationship at that time and more of an awareness of Georgia's problems. During that same time the Right to Read Program came along—in the 70's—and the State Department of Education was real involved. They

had a fine director of reading and language arts. But I wouldn't want to leave anybody out when commenting on who has contributed a lot to the field of reading in the state of Georgia, because there were many people who made a large contribution at all levels.

Dillon: Where do you see things going in Georgia as far as reading is concerned?

Aaron: I would imagine that there would be very close attention paid to skills development because of the type of assessments being made. This has its advantages and disadvantages. It makes sure you reach the minimum levels with most youngsters but it doesn't assure that you are doing much more. It has a positive effect if your skills are defined broadly enough—rather than just for the test. Teachers can be more aware of the kinds of things that are involved during reading though. Teachers are a rather sensible group—I have a lot of faith in them—but sometimes they get pushed by the fear of competence. There are some youngsters who won't make progress. Those are the youngsters that you can teach your heart out to the best possible way and still not get the results that you want.

When asked about the national status of reading education, Dr. Aaron mentioned that the giants in the field of reading are gone. He reassured me that we now have more people working on various reading questions, and that even though it may take longer, we will end up with better programs, materials and teaching suggestions.

Retirement

Retirement from the presidency of IRA and just recently from the University of Georgia are now a reality for Dr. Aaron. It has been rumored, however, that Dr. Ira will never really retire. He related that he hopes to sleep later (until 6:15 a.m. instead of 5:45 a.m.), read his two newspapers more thoroughly, spend additional time in the library reading, and travel to New Zealand and Australia. I was curious as to whether Dr. Aaron would have changed any course or path he had taken in his career.

Aaron: Oh gosh, I don't know. I probably would have gotten a self-service service station (chuckling) and let them bring me the money!

Dillion: You don't think you would have changed any path you've taken?

Aaron: Well, I'm the type of person that can adapt, in other words, people say, "What will he do when he retires?" Well, when I got out of the directorship of the clinic, I never read another single report . . . that was years ago. I just swishhhhhh cut myself clean and moved on into the next act. Whatever I do I can adapt—what I'd like to do is start over knowing as much as I know now and having the contracts I have now (chuckling). I'm sure there are some things I would change—I made a decision early that I didn't want to go into administration—college administration was not for me. I had a feeling that I might be able to do things better than the people I'd be delegating to and that's not a good feeling for an administrator to have.

Dillon: But you found the niche and contributed a lot . . .

Aaron: Well, even if it had been some other niche, I probably would have done that job too—I'm adaptable—despite the fact that some people think I'm rigid (we both laugh). Whatever the job is, I usually get involved in it.

Dr. Aaron's personal trait of "getting in and getting the job done" seems to have guided most of his career. His knack of falling into the right place at the right time, coupled with an ability to adapt effectively to new situations, have advanced his career. But these alone would be meaningless without combining them, as Dr. Aaron does, with his skill in relating to others and "downplaying" his own accomplishments. Admired and respected by his colleagues and students, Dr. Aaron is truly a giant in the field of reading education and an outstanding educator in Georgia.

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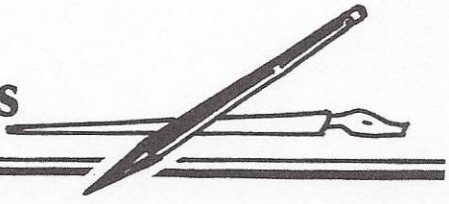
About the Authors



Nancy Chase is an assistant professor at Georgia State University. She teaches reading and writing courses in the Division of Developmental Studies.

Deborah Dillon recently completed the final requriements for a Ph.D. from the Reading Education Program at the University of Georgia. With the start of the new year, she will begin teaching duties at Purdue University.

Belita Gordon is an associate professor in the Division of Developmental Studies at Georgia State University. She teaches reading and composition courses.

Michele L. Simpson is an assistant professor with the Developmental Studies Program at the University of Georgia. She currently serves as the acting coordinator of the reading unit.

James E. Walker is chairperson of the Curriculum and Instruction Department at Texas Woman's University. His areas of expertise include secondary and postsecondary reading instruction.

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