Fascination with Psychology and Teaching of Reading: Part II

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by Jeanne S. Chall

Part II of a two-part series. Part I appeared in the fall, 1993, issue of the newsletter.

It was at City College of CUNY in the 1950s and early 1960s that I started to concentrate, in collaboration with Florence Roswell, on the diagnosis and treatment of children, youth, and adults with reading problems. Our collaboration has continued to the present. Indeed, the time I have spent diagnosing and treating individuals with reading problems and teaching and supervising teachers in this work has been extremely absorbing and enriching. It has influenced not only my teaching and research on reading difficulties but most of my other research as well, particularly the research I undertook in the early 1960s on beginning reading methods. Concerned with prevention of reading problems, I sought to find whether there was any evidence that certain beginning reading methods produce better results and help prevent reading failure. This research, which was carried out when I was at City College, became the book, Learning to Read: The Great Debate (1967), which was published and later updated when I was at Harvard.

My move to Harvard in 1965 brought new concentrations in reading, where much of my attention was focused on building and directing a graduate program for master's and doctoral students with the purpose of providing training in both scholarship and practice. My teaching focused on both research and practice. Through the years I taught the doctoral seminar on reading research, which was a historical overview of the research on reading and provided practice in synthesizing this research. I also taught courses in the diagnosis and treatment of reading disabilities and, with the assistance of doctoral students, supervised the testing and teaching in the Harvard Reading Laboratory. I also taught a general course on reading for administrators and planners and other non-reading majors that focused on social policy.

My research continued to be concerned with issues of theory and practice, but it moved somewhat to theory and social policy. Among my studies of reading and social policy was the one commissioned by the Panel on the SAT Score Decline, published in 1977. It was extended to a larger study, Do Textbooks Challenge Students: A Case for Easy or Hard Textbooks (1991).

My interests in medical aspects of reading failure became even stronger at Harvard, and I attended lectures at Harvard Medical School on neurology and language; and I edited, with Allan Mirsky, the National Society for the Study of Education Yearbook, Education and the Brain (1978).

The unanswered questions in The Great Debate led me to a theoretical study of the reading process, Stages of Reading Development (1983), a work on how reading changes qualitatively as it develops. This was an important study for me since many of the controversies on methods and materials seemed to stem from two theories of the reading

process: a single-stage theory or a multi-stage theory. From my synthesis of the relevant theory and research on how reading develops and from my experience in teaching reading at all levels, I concluded that a developmental, multi-stage theory fit the data better and was instructionally more useful.

In The Reading Crisis: Why Poor Children Fall Behind (1990), we attempted to learn why the literacy of low-income children begins to decelerate around grade four and how deceleration can be prevented. The theoretical basis for the study came from my Stages of Reading Development. The work was further enriched by collaboration with linguists and many faculty and graduate students at Harvard.

My interest in social policy also brought me to studies of the trends in the reading scores on the National Assessments of Educational Progress, and I have tried to explain these trends by relating them to methods and materials used in the schools and to community support for reading. Earlier, in 1975, I co-edited with John Carroll, Toward a Literate Society (1975), the proceedings of the commission on literacy appointed by the National Academy of Education.

As I reflect on my various professional interests and activities, I am aware of different concentrations at different times. During my early years I concentrated on psychology, statistics, and research design -- on objectivity in searching for knowledge about reading. Later I focused on problems in learning to read and took on the concerns of the teacher and clinician: why certain individuals have difficulty in learning to read, how to help those individuals, and how to prevent such problems. Thus my first concerns with the science of reading turned to teaching and healing, and I delved into the neurosciences as well as into the art of teaching.

Jeanne S. Chall, Professor of Education Emerita at Harvard, is recognized as one of the leading writer/ researchers in the field of reading. Her two most recent works include a textbook, Do Textbooks Challenge Students: A Case for Easy or Hard Textbooks (1991), and a study on reading scores, The Reading Crisis: Why Poor Children Fall Behind (1990).

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