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PROFILE: Martha L. King: Language Arts Pioneer

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## PROFILE



# MARTHA L. KING: LANGUAGE ARTS PIONEER

Evelyn B. Freeman

*On arriving at my classroom the day after Labor Day, I found 24 children sitting in four rows, evenly divided among four grades, including six in the first grade. The children were there, but books, learning materials of any kind, were scarce or badly worn and dirty. There was a box of chalk sitting on a window ledge and I remembered Experience Charts and Stories that I had learned about at the university. After two years, I moved to a larger school where I had only the second and third grades in one room. Later, when I began teaching a seventh grade in Athens County, the principal came to my door on the first day with a full box of chalk in his hand and greeted me with, 'Now here is a full box of chalk and a good teacher will empty it by Spring.'*

Over tea in her living room, I listened to Martha King's animated stories about her life and work, including this description of her first teaching job in a two-room school in rural Rehoboth, Ohio, in 1938. I quickly realized that the passing of 65 years has not diminished her zest for life, her enthusiasm for learning, or her belief in children and teachers.

Martha L. King is Professor Emerita at The Ohio State University where she was a faculty member for 25 years. This Profile introduces *Language Arts* readers to a remarkable and inspirational woman whose contributions over more than four decades added immeasurably to our understandings of children's oral language, critical reading, and writing.

## ABOUT HER LIFE

Martha was born in Crooksville, Ohio, a small village in the southeastern region of the state. She was the fifth child in a family of three boys and three girls. Upon her high school graduation in 1936, the Great Depression had settled deeply in the region, making a long dream of attending college seem impossible. Fortunately, Ohio University came to her rescue with a scholarship for tuition that was \$100 per semester. This allowed her to enroll in a special program in which one could obtain a certificate to teach in elementary schools with just two years of college coursework. When the offer came in 1938 for her first teaching job, Martha says,

*I didn't accept the job when it was first offered because all of my experience, both as a child in school and as a student teacher, had been in single grade classrooms. Further, I was concerned about my ability to teach six-year-olds to read. These concerns were all pushed aside by the County Superintendent and local officials who said, "Oh, you'll be fine, we expect a small class and maybe only two or three first graders."*

While teaching, Martha continued to attend Ohio University in the evening and over the summer until she completed her B.A. degree in 1942, during the depths of World War II. Martha was first a counselor, and then director, of a summer camp in the Cleveland area in the summers of 1943, '44, and '45.

*It was a great opportunity to get to know children (ages 6–12 years) well, and work with a young staff of college students. It was a superb course in child and adolescent behavior, and along the way, I earned enough money to go to New York for a master's degree at Columbia University Teachers College.*

Martha focused on curriculum and the elementary principalship at Teachers College. She remembers entering her first class with Harold Rugg, a leader in the progressive education movement and an inspiring teacher. After receiving her master's degree in 1946, Martha returned to Ohio to teach and to serve as a supervising critic teacher (the expression used at that time for cooperating or mentor teacher) for Ohio University's rural teacher training school. One term, she had 45 fourth-grade children in her class and five student teachers: three came in the morning, and two in the afternoon. After two years, Martha accepted a position as supervisor and curriculum consultant for the Franklin County Schools, the county in which both the city of Columbus and The Ohio State University are located. In 1957, she received her Ph.D. from The Ohio State University, and joined the faculty there in 1959. Martha explained how she came to Ohio State to teach:

*After I received my Ph.D. in 1957, I thought it time after ten years to venture forth from my supervisory role at the*

Franklin County Board of Education. I hadn't thought of higher education, but rather thought of a different kind of administrative/supervisory job in a city school district. In my doctoral program, I studied in the area of Elementary Education as well as in Educational Administration and passed the required eight-hour examinations in both.

In the summer of 1958, two key professors in Elementary Education, Charlotte Huck and James Burr, were on professional leave and someone had to be found to take their courses in *The Language Arts and Elementary School Curriculum*. On a very warm day in June, I walked into my first class and found 71 students, and into the second and found 60. I wanted to escape. Apparently, however, the challenge was just too great and I stayed. Two or three days later the Department Chairman informed me that I was to have a Graduate Assistant, who, as it turned out, was enrolled in my first class. Her name, incidentally, was Patricia Cianciolo, who became a long-time professor of children's literature at Michigan State University. The next autumn I began teaching at Ohio State—three courses, *Child Development*, *Language Arts*, and *Reading*.

Although her early academic interests had focused on curriculum and supervision, Martha developed a strong interest in young children's learning, particularly in how they learned to talk, read, and write. Her scholarly and academic contributions continue to inform language arts education. They revolve around five major themes: critical reading, the development of the graduate program in reading, informal education, children's language development, and young children's writing development.

## CRITICAL READING STUDY

Believing that younger children are or can become discriminating, critical readers, Martha collaborated with Willavene Wolf, Charlotte S. Huck, and Bernice D. Ellinger in research funded by the U.S. Office of Education, "Critical Reading Ability of Elementary School Children." The goal of the study was to define critical reading and then identify the essential skills/abilities it implies. Martha recalls,

*The "Explosion of Knowledge" in the 60s included new investigations in reading; more than fifty studies of Critical Reading alone were reported in the first five years of that decade. Less than one-fourth were research studies and most were focused on students above the seventh grade.*

*Our study was a demanding, interesting adventure, involving developing teaching materials, organizing workshops to train teachers, creating teacher units and an observation scale, as well as *The Critical Reading Test*. We settled on a definition by Helen Robinson because she made*

*explicit some of the conditions we believed necessary for its development. For example, critical reading 'is judgment of the veracity, validity, or worth of what is read, based on sound criteria or standards through previous experiences.'*

Twenty-four teachers and their students participated in the study designed to involve experimental and control groups in grades one through six. Four classrooms at each grade level participated. The experimental groups received critical reading instruction using teaching units provided by the staff. Because the study concerned critical reading, the skills focused on the semantics, logic, and authenticity of written materials. Skills in literary materials included recognizing literary forms, identifying components of literature, and identifying literary devices. The results indicated that students in grades one through six can learn to read critically. The experimental groups' scores on the Critical Reading Test were higher than the control groups' at all grade levels, although the difference was marginally significant at grades two and six. The experimental groups scored higher than the control group at every level on the logic section of the test. "Teaching children to apply logical reasoning to printed materials is one effective means of increasing their growth in critical reading ability" (Wolf, Huck, & King, 1967, p. 108). They also identified general reading ability and intelligence as factors that relate to critical reading ability. Martha reflected:

*There were other interesting results, some tested in fine dissertations at the time. Certainly, there is room for new studies in relation to the multimedia and advertising aimed at children today; that is, new studies that would reflect today's culture and concepts of the role of literature in our lives.*

Another outcome of the study was a book, *Critical Reading* (King, Ellinger, & Wolf, 1967), that brought together 50 articles considered useful to other researchers and interested teachers. In "Critical Reading, What Else?" she developed the case for teaching critical reading and described it as "purposeful reading rather than a passive or apathetic act. The critical reader clearly knows why he is reading; exhibits an open, inquiring attitude; and considers the reliability of the source of information" (King, 1973, p. 295).

## GRADUATE PROGRAM IN READING

The Ohio State graduate program in reading, language arts, and children's literature was shaped by Martha and her colleague, Charlotte Huck. When Martha joined the faculty at Ohio State, there was one course in reading and one course in language arts at the undergraduate

level. At the graduate level, there was only one course in language arts that included content about reading.

*It became clear that we needed to change this, so two courses were added, one in reading and another in literature. With a single course in reading methods, more attention could be given to the other language arts and children's literature. With expanded offerings in reading and language arts, we were able to take advantage of grants from the U.S. Office of Education that supported graduate students in language learning and reading.*

Grants from the U.S. Office of Education in 1967 and 1968 funded the Reading Fellowship Program to prepare teachers for leadership roles in their school districts. The two programs Martha and Charlotte co-directed focused on the language arts with emphases on reading and children's literature. The university was required to set aside two rooms for the fellows, one for classes, and another for materials, study, and fellowship. The "Reading Center" was established to meet these requirements.

*Interest in education was high in the sixties; there was much concern about the education of the general population, but particularly in regard to teachers' access to new knowledge in their fields and knowing how best to teach it. The Fellowship Program for Inservice Teachers was born. Fellows studied and worked in both university and elementary school classrooms. Their experiences were broadened and enriched by consultants from inside and outside the College; for example, Nancy Larrick and Madeline L'Engle enhanced literature and writing offerings; Kenneth Goodman and Carolyn Burke came in turn every other week to Columbus from Wayne State in Detroit to teach miscue analysis and discuss psycholinguistics; Edgar Dale was often available to consult, teach, or advise.*

These grants led to the development of a new Program of Graduate Studies in Reading. Martha served as the Coordinator of this program from 1968–1976 and concisely summarized its mission: "[F]rom the beginning, the Graduate Program was conceived as interdepartmental and firmly based in language and literature. . . . The program has emphasized learning to read within the whole context of language learning and has supported an enduring view that literature is the most satisfying content for reading" (King, 2002, para. 4).

Through the efforts of NCTE, the Fellowship Program benefited from the visit of British drama educator Dorothy Heathcote, who gave faculty and students a



sense of what drama in education can do to extend and enhance learning. She made several return visits that:

*. . . paved the way for a different concept of drama in education here. She showed through splendid examples of how, by taking on different roles, children are able to form new kinds of meanings, to experience what it is to become involved in lives of other people in different places, and most certainly in the imagination. Drama in education allows teachers and students to expand the environment and go beyond the walls of the classroom to different times and places, to take on roles—become a museum curator or an archaeologist—and in so doing to assume for the moment the attitudes, beliefs, and language of another.*

A strong program in drama education continues at OSU today, in harmony with the graduate program in language, literature, and reading.

## INFORMAL EDUCATION

Informal classrooms were well established in England, so Charlotte Huck and Martha traveled to England to visit schools, talk with teachers, and observe firsthand informal education in action. Their interest in the implementation of the informal way of learning grew out of their previous research:

*After being closely involved with working in schools and teachers in the Fellowship Program, it is not surprising that our thoughts turned to ways of making life and learning better and more comfortable for teachers and children in the public schools. Imaginative changes were being instituted in*



*schools in North Dakota, Philadelphia, New York's Harlem, North Carolina, and beginnings were underway in at least one local primary school in Columbus. "Can it happen here?" The answer was the beginning of EPIC, Education Programs for Informal Classrooms.*

Martha and Charlotte agreed to begin a class in Informal Education for preservice teachers, and also made collaborative arrangements to work with two elementary schools where EPIC students would work as observers and assistants. In recent years, the "I" in EPIC has changed to "integrated." The influence of informal, integrated learning can still be found in Ohio; one of the schools involved in the informal program celebrated its 30th anniversary in October 2002.

In 1974, Martha wrote *Informal Learning* in which she defines and explains informal education, and discusses the new roles for teachers, how to evaluate learning, and the importance of relationships in the classroom and beyond to parents and administrators. She also coauthored an article on how informal learning practices foster individuality. The authors summarize, "It is the quality of the teacher, her understanding of the vital part she plays as diagnostician, as facilitator, as fellow learner, that makes the difference between bland, passive learning and education that is alive, that is challenging, that is immensely satisfying" (King, Dunn, & McKenzie, 1974, p. 110). At the urging of graduate students, Martha organized study tours to England for graduate students interested in visiting schools and teacher centers and interacting with British scholars.

*Students visited recommended schools in London and other areas. Of course, we went to plays, attended the London symphony, and visited a class at the London University. We traveled as far north as West Riding in Yorkshire where schools had long profited from the leadership of Sir Alec Clegg. We were astonished by the quality and variety of work underway.*

## UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Supported by a federal grant in the early 1970s, Martha and a group of Ohio State faculty, Johanna DeStefano, Victor Rentel, and Frank Zidonis, undertook a project, "The Language of Children: Protocol Materials on Oral Language Acquisition."

*The intellectual climate of the times was rich all through the 1960s. Linguists, sociologists, psychologists had unprecedented influence on school practices. They addressed significant problems related to language discrepancies between home, community, and school. Most of their work*

*was centered on language structure, and its development and use in diverse communities and cultural groups.*

Based on the most current research and the work on how language is embedded in culture, the project developed audiotapes, slides, films, and videos that focused on aspects of language learning and language use for preservice and inservice teachers. The protocols revealed the development of children's language learning, especially their language structures and the situations in which they are used.

Another important contribution during this time period was Martha's editing of a book with Robert Emans and Patricia J. Cianaciolo, *A Forum for Focus* (NCTE, 1973). This book highlights the extensive research being conducted in the language arts in the late 1960s. In the introduction, Martha wrote, "The central focus has been shifted from learning content to a concern for people, from materialism to humanism. Developing people, by increasing their understanding of language and literature and their abilities in communication, is the general theme running through this collection" (p. xi). The book included 37 articles by well-known authors who had presented at language arts conferences sponsored by NCTE.

Bernice Cullinan (1989) characterized Martha as one who "brought together, integrated, coordinated, and pulled the threads together." If a conference was needed to receive or share new information, she became involved as in 1976 when she worked with Olga Garnica to organize a conference on social interaction and language development at The Ohio State University. The conference included such influential researchers as Roger Shuy, Dell Hymes, Courtney Cazden, and Vera John-Steiner who presented papers on various aspects of



language, particularly emphasizing sociolinguistics. Many of the papers appeared in a book coedited by Martha and Olga K. Garnica, *Language, Children and Society: The Effect of Social Factors on Children Learning to Communicate* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979).

To make new knowledge about children's language learning available to teachers, Martha brought together research articles on language acquisition and use in 1975 for an issue of *Theory into Practice*. As guest editor and author, Martha summarized important insights from research on language acquisition, including the importance of context in language learning, the process of learning how to mean, children's constructions of their own linguistic systems, the tacit learning of language, and the highly personal nature of language.

Martha edited a second TIP issue in 1977 on language and reading, which included articles by John Downing, Arthur Applebee, Marie Clay, and others. In her article on evaluating reading, Martha began by stating, "Confusion, along with some ignorance and indifference, characterizes the present state of the art of evaluating reading. We continue to assess without being sure of the validity of what we are measuring nor the adequacy of the tools we are using" (p. 408). She concluded by referring to Leo Lionni's tale of the inchworm who was very good at measuring things—a flamingo's neck or the whole of a hummingbird. But when challenged by a nightingale to measure her song, he replied, "I measure things, not songs" (p. 416).

## HOW CHILDREN LEARN TO WRITE

Martha contributed substantially to our understanding of primary children learning how to mean in written language. In 1976, she participated in a study group sponsored by NCTE's Research Committee and Research Foundation that explored "what is known already about writing and what still needs to be discovered. . . . The goal is to develop a cohesive framework that will allow researchers to cooperate and build on each others' work" (King, 1978, pp. 193–194). Martha wrote an article on the need for theory in research on composition based on the work of this study group (King, 1978).

Victor Rentel and Martha coauthored "Toward a Theory of Early Writing Development" and discussed the "crucial factors that enable children to shift from creating 'messages' to taking on the text features of written discourse" (King & Rentel, 1979, p. 244). They elaborated on four factors: sustained speech, story and the organization of memory, the role of cohesion in generating texts, and the role of context. Their work drew attention to the notion that "children learn how to write as a natural extension of their desire to communicate both to

themselves and others what they know and are learning about the richness of their social and material world. They hypothesize, discover, invent, correct, and approximate the distinctive conventions of writing" (p. 251).

*In the early 1970s, there was tremendous interest in how much children learn about speaking, reading, writing, and spelling before they enter school. Investigations by Read (1971) on invented spelling, Clay (1975) on principles children follow in creating messages, and McKenzie (1974) on early readers who claim to be self-taught suggest that children are powerful learners. But the question arises: Does this intuitive power continue to thrive when they enter school and further develop as readers and writers? What does a six-year-old child know when she produces a*

*four-page booklet with comments and pictures of her vacation? It is cohesive because the pictures and the brief expressions in writing hang together. The Ohio State study of young children's writing explored questions related to what children intuitively know and do when their writing develops and they produce longer texts.*



The Early Writing Project was funded by the National Institute of Education from 1979–1982. Conducted by Martha and Victor Rentel, it was a two-year longitudinal study of two separate populations of 32 children: a kindergarten/grade 1 cohort and a grade 1/grade 2 cohort. These children attended classrooms in two schools, a suburban and an urban one. More formally, the research sought "to investigate the initial period in schooling when children extend their communicative competence to include the written code" and "to describe and explain the changes in children's text" (King, Rentel, Pappas, Pettegrew, & Zutell, 1981, p. 1). With a focus on understanding how children make the transition from reliance on oral language to competence in written discourse, the study looked at children's production of three types of text: story retelling, dictated stories, and written stories. The population of the urban school included black dialect speakers, so the role of dialect in writing development was also considered.

One aspect of their research focused on cohesion and how children develop the use of cohesive elements in written text. Their results indicated that "all children substantially increased their reliance on vocabulary

relationships (lexical ties) to make their texts cohesive and context free . . . all children increasingly employed conjunction to achieve their textual ends" (King and Rentel, 1981, pp. 726–727). King and Rentel encouraged teachers to provide children opportunities to write for a range of purposes in a variety of genres.

Martha acknowledged the important role that graduate students played in this project, as in all of her research:

*In my informal education work, the protocol project, and the writing studies, the role of graduate students was significant. Many times they were involved in the project from the beginning; their knowledge and insight contributed substantially.*

## LIFE AFTER RETIREMENT

Martha retired gradually, teaching occasionally for about two years and writing when asked to do so. She wrote an article with Moira McKenzie to "share children's work and endeavor to trace the origins and development of their literary competence as it grows in participation and enjoyment of literature" (King and McKenzie, 1988, p. 305). Another article focused on "how drama can be a powerful force in children's growth in reading and writing" (Edmiston, Enciso and King, 1987 p. 219).

Martha became active in the Literacy Connection, a teacher-initiated group in central Ohio that sponsors professional activities and gives grants to teachers to support classroom research. She worked with the group to develop a booklet for parents, "Reading Begins at Home," and was instrumental in securing a Spanish translation of the booklet. For the first decade after her retirement, she traveled to China, Alaska, Africa, France, and frequently to London. More recently, she has engaged in activities of the Ohio State Retirees Association, with special interest in the book club and opera.

Martha has received several awards including: the Reading Hall of Fame; the Hall of Fame of the College of Education, The Ohio State University; and the Distinguished Researcher Award of the National Conference on Research in Language and Literacy. Upon her retirement, the Language Arts/Reading/Children's Literature Center at the Ohio State University was renamed the Martha L. King Center for Language and Literacies.

In her four decades as an educator, Martha's impact on the field of language arts is reflected in multiple ways: the elementary teachers whom she prepared for informal classrooms; her graduate students who now work with preservice and inservice teachers; her books, journal articles, and research publications; and the graduate literacy program at The Ohio State University. Martha has never wavered from her belief in the importance of chil-

dren's language development in literacy learning, the critical role of the teacher in supporting children's growth, and the impact of the social context in the teaching and learning process.

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## Author Biography

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