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ABSTRACT

This paper presents and discusses some existing problems in and proposed solutions for establishing a professional posture and developing a science of teaching reading. The problems discussed include: the immense size and complexity of the educational enterprise in physical plant, personnel, students, and curriculum; the size of the educational social unit and how individual teacher efforts to attain and maintain instructional excellence often go unrewarded and unrecognized; the priority favoring basic research in reading process generally conducted in colleges and universities and applied research conducted in the public schools; and the inordinate amounts of time-seeking methodologies that are different or innovative for reading instruction. (WR)

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TEACHING READING: THE SCIENCE AND THE ART

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For some time I have been thinking of this august occasion and of its topic . . . Teaching reading the science and the art. And at a recent convention and listening to a brilliant monologist and teacher I there wished that I could have changed the title of my speech here to . . . and this is the title Look look Come come See Charlotte's Web.

Because I think that that title brings the concepts of teaching reading as a science and an art to the realities of classrooms, schools, some very human teachers and some little children who may very well need to appreciate and recognize the simplicity of look look before they can enjoy the beauty and charm of Charlotte's Web.

What has been created in our schools and within our fraternity is an unfortunate dichotomy that places all the look-looks on one side of the fence and all the spiders on the other.

And I have reiterated for ever long my conviction that the best place to learn how to read is on a mothers lap or a fathers knee in the warmth and security of the written word so gently read. But learning to read at home as but a natural extension of acquiring the spoken word is categorically not the same as learning to read in school. The latter is a thoroughly devised and contrived environment at best or worse at worst. These opening observations are niether critical of schools nor of the teachers who dwell therein. They are a recognition of some realities that mightly condition whether children become more successful readers in schools or whether the first steps in reading are halting and fraught with insecurity.

One other observation before confronting the topic at hand (though in my own mind that confrontation has already been initiated) . . . Schools should not count their excellences on the basis of the numbers of fluent readers within

the building. The success of a school reading program rests on the numbers of children who do learn to read in school who would not have learned to read without the existence of the school . ... the numbers of children who come to us in psychological and emotional disrepair, those who come with language difference significant in disparity, those in the lowest deciles quartiles and domiciles . . . here lies the measure of our success . . . and the tragedy of our failures.

Perhaps Thomas Wolfe in his searching and poignant novel Look Homeward Angel phrased the tragedy more cogently and eloquently . . .

He wondered savagely how they would feel if they knew what he really thought. Unfathomable lonliness and sadness crept through him. . . he knew he would always be the sad one; caged in that little round of a skull, imprisoned in that beating and most secret heart. He saw himself as an inarticulate stranger, an amusing clown. . His eyes gazed intently on great wooden blocks piled chaotically on the floor. All the letters of the alphabet were engraved upon them. He studied for hours the symbols of speech, knowing that he had here the stones of the temple of language and striving desperately to find the key that would draw order and intelligence from this anarchy.

It was Voltaire who admonished...if you would debate with me define your terms.

Science: a branch of knowledge or study dealing with a body of facts or truths systematically arranged and demonstrating the operation of general laws.

Through usage and tradition most segments of our society view the term science in noun forms. We speak of a science of physics or of medicine or of biology....we are comfortable in applying the term to the physical, natural or life sciences. Rarely is the term science used in defining reading theory and practice though what we do know about reading most appropriately fits into the category of a behavioral science.

I wish that we could begin to think of teaching reading as a science in terms of applied practices .....of efficient methodologies... of expert technique....for by defining the term in verb forms.....action behaviors, if you wish, I think we could begin to develop a profession of reading teachers and a discipline which would be universally accepted and respected.

A first step, I believe is a clear understanding of where we are as a developing profession for I cannot acknowledge that we have "systematically

arranged our truths" nor have we "demonstrated the operation of general laws." But so immense is the body of knowledge to be acquired...neurological phenomena, the nature of the language, the infinite spiritual and physical complexity of the learner and the teacher that many, many, many generations will pass before we can assume the dignity of that accolade which Plato prematurely assigned to teaching...as the noblest of the professions.

I believe that presently our developing profession is a mosaic of individual teacher excellence and ignorance, commitment and avoidance, responsibility and irresponsibility.....in short as Dickens described a similar scene in The Tale of Two Cities .... it was the best of times it was the worst of times.

We cannot yet assure that every child who comes to school will learn to read to the fullest of his intellectual and emotional capacity. We are still perplexed by the need to provide basic and essential reading skills instruction for all children and a more significant and desirable need to provide for the diversity of pupil tastes and interests in our school reading programs. Seemingly we are unwilling or unable to refine our technical competencies in teaching basic decoding skills and concurrently afraid to entertain and explore the notion that reading as a developed skill is a process not an elementary school subject.

There appears entirely too much conformity in elementary reading practice and subject matter beyond decoding skill mastery and too great a zeal to produce "well balanced" readers and coordinated reading programs. Most ideally the goal of democratic educational processes should be in ouraging unique talents, individual excellences, personal goals and values.

There appears little merit and even less justification for an excellence of conformity in school reading programs. What seems clearly needed is an excellence of diversity in such programs once the child has learned to read.

In seeking to establish a truly professional posture and to develop a science of teaching reading an appreciation of several debilitating problems and some proposed solutions will place our present condition in perspective.

A first problem is the immense size and complexity of the education enterprise in physical plant, personnel including administrators, teachers and students, and curriculum. The scope of the enterprise itself affects all segments of our society. No other national activity is so universally understood and accepted....no other takes a larger share of local tax support or has the compelling force of legislation to require its use.

But it is a time for reflection on what "the school" has become. Any social institution this large and separate, in all too many instances, from neighborhoods, communities and society tends to further isolate itself when the curriculum growth and instructional procedures are generated internally. Schools increasingly need to examine most critically the content of existing school curriculum programs and to begin to look to the neighborhood and community for curriculum resource.

Schools have clearly overextended their instructional capacity to deal with existing curriculum programs. This is especially true in the context of reading as an applied skills since reading activities remain the single most frequently used mode of acquiring information, knowledge and wisdom in all discipline areas for all students.

If every classroom teacher is to be a professional teacher of reading and if we are to have a science of teaching reading, the elementary curriculum must be reordered, priorities assigned on the basis of the skills to be acquired through formal schooling and a reassignment of certain curriculum areas, and newer areas that need to be developed, to the neighborhoods and communities.

The most serious impediment to improved classroom instructional practice in my view, is the present overbearing time consuming and highly questionable elementary school curriculum.

Most emphatically the scope of the elementary school curriculum should be reduced, the amount of time pupils spend in formal learning experiences in classrooms in other than basic skills subjects should be curtailed and significantly increased preparation time to teach basic subjects should be afforded. We are very glib in describing creative teaching as if creativity was both commonplace and spontaneous. If we interpret creativity as symptomatic of an art we have made the presumption that a science has already been evolved. All art of whatever form, whether static or behavioral is superior to science. Throughout the long history of developing art forms the instances of genius are brilliant but rare. Great art like great humanity is generally the result of refined talent, endured adversity, arduous toil and total commitment. One major reason for the paucity of creative teaching efforts is the obvious lack of time to prepare comprehensive and effective instructional plans and materials.

When the elementary school curriculum is reduced and when students spend significant amounts of time in community educational projects and activities, teachers will have the necessary time for adequate preparation. We are similarly facile in discussions related to the psychological well being of the student forgetting that in most instances this psychological tranquility is predicated on the psychological well being of the teachers. The psychological stress of both pupils and teachers and the emotional consequences that violate learning and cognitive process are invariably the result of poor planning by the teacher, inadequate instructional material for the learner, frustration, authoritarian behaviors and consequent rebellious responses. If teaching and learning in the elementary school are to have integrity and dignity then teachers must be given additional time for preparation and reflection.

I further believe and especially in the urban areas

and where critical reading skill need exists, that the very approbation of peripheral, though highly desirable, curriculum studies provides an evasive avenue to avoid the most arduous task of teaching children to read effectively and to learn the world of quantitive measure.

I wish to underscore most emphatically, however, that I do not opt for nor desire minimum curriculum study for pupils in our schools. The study of art, music, the physical, life and social sciences, the drama, dance and all studies that enrich and beautify the education process are needed if we are to develop compassionate imaginative creative and cultured citizens.

But I believe that those areas of interest and study, and involvement in the world of work are implemented best by utilization of community

resources functioning with community and school leadership resources for total elementary educational programming. It is at that point of a reasonable elementary school curriculum that we can develop some tentative criteria for instructional excellence in the search for a science of teaching reading.

The very size of the educational social unit produces another problem perhaps even more critical than the curriculum one. Individual teacher efforts to attain and maintain instructional excellence often go unrewarded and more often unrecognized. Students, parents, and administrators are often insensitive to the major efforts required to attain teaching excellence. All of us need recognition, the human condition craves approving attention and notice. Harry Rivlin, the former Dean of the College of Education of Fordham University, once remarked that teaching was a lonely profession.....unfortunately, his observation in all too many instances is tragically accurate. And over a period of time and human neglect goals and ideals are lost or compromised, spiritual and emotional commitment give way to lethargy and neglect and the teaching of reading, especially in programs for those children for whom the learning task is difficult, becomes an activity to be tolerated at best, and avoided if possible.

This condition can be overcome only through an appreciation that the most enduring rewards for professional excellence are those of personal satisfaction at having successfully completed the tasks utilizing maximum efforts, abilities, and potential. But there remains for the professional teacher of reading that uncertainty that there might be better means, improved techniques, more refined procedures. For truly creative teachers, uncertainty even with successful techniques

is a virtue. Because it is this very uncertainty that spurs and drives, even without external recognition, toward additional accomplishment...to be uncertain over those accomplishments and to begin again, ever searching, seeking...to accomplish again.....to doubt and to begin anew once more. But life is, after all, dear fellow teachers that great adventurous, tortuous, hurtful search for self....or it is nothing at all.....

A third problem that affects our development to a professional level is an attitude that creates an unfortunate priority favoring basic research in reading process generally conducted in Universities and Colleges and applied research conducted in the public schools on a day-by-day basis. The most serious impediment to our assuming professional status is our technological inadequacies. Our critical problems are those of methods, appropriate ancillary instructional materials and time; a challenge of increasing the amount and quality of pupil learning per instructional time unit. Unless and until major research efforts are made in the area of instructional/learning variables in public school settings and unless and until translators of basic reading research for applied school practice are trained in the universities, no major advances in reading theory and practice will be made. A fourth problem again directly relates to existing relationships among colleges and universities and the public schools.

These relationships exist or unfortunately do not exist at the undergradute, graduate and in-service levels. University Colleges of Education and College Divisions of Education have little reason for existing beyond that of improving the quality of public education. Too often in the past universities and colleges have isolated themselves

from the public school and too often universities and colleges have perpetuated on-campus courses with little relevance to public school realities...and just as often major curriculum and organizational decisions are made by the public schools without benefit of the expertise of higher education faculties...and all too often university personnel are simply not welcome in the public schools. It was as if we were engaged in separate occupations or were cleft with irreconcilable objectives, means, and philosophies. If the teaching of reading is to be better in the future, and acknowledging that it has been good in the past, then all segments of the reading fraternity must aggressively seek opportunities for cooperative discussion, exhibit a willingness to accept counsel each from the other and ultimately to provide our clientele, the children, young adults, adults and all citizens who come to us in literacy need, the very best possible education our present wisdom can provide.

But perhaps our greatest challenge in attaining a science of reading instruction and a profession of reading teachers is in the selection of appropriate curriculum materials, classroom management of instructional programs and classroom methodology and technique. Our problems categorically are not philosophical...we all agree on what should be accomplished in school reading programs, and we are in almost universal agreement on the reasons, both practical and cultural, for achieving those objectives. Major differences of opinion and bias exist, however, in the selection of appropriate reading curriculum materials. We have succeeded in developing an unfortunate cultism which labels linguistic programs as exclusively

linguistic, phonic programs as exclusively phonic and gestalt programs as exclusively gestalt and on and exclusively on. No currently available commercial reading curriculum programs are so narrowly devised to exclude the use of phonic, linguistic, gestalt or other methodologies. Our fault has been an unwillingness to adjust the basic prescribed methodology of the various teachers' manuals on the basis of the observed learning behaviors of the pupil. Teachers of reading should be encouraged to logically depart from the manual when such refinements appear in the best interests of the children to be taught. Once a basal type reading curriculum program has been selected for use by an educational unit that is but the very first step in developing a truly effective classroom program. The existing materials should be critically scrutinized not only before selection but even more critically after selection. Additional, ancillary supplementary and component programs should then be integrated into the basic program. A major debilitating problem related to developing highly effective reading programs has been our zeal in "adding to" or supplementing basic programs by additional skill materials which utilize written vocabularies and skill sequences which are antagonistic to and incompatible with basic classroom programs.

The most effective supportive or reinforcing materials are those written by the reading practitioners using the written vocabulary and the skill sequence of the basic classroom program. Thus a comprehensive, cohesive and logical program can be developed which to my mind, is very different from a variety of incompatible component programs utilized in the same instructional setting. Such efforts, if they are to be significant, obviously must be total faculty efforts with the produced instructional material shared by all.

A second area of concern is the classroom management of reading programs. If we are to maximize the use of student and teacher time we must begin to think of sub grouping and independent reading activities as part of the developmental program. We have tended to think of reading instruction as something that occurs only in direct teacher-learner interactions. We further compound the problem when available instructional time is equally distributed among learning groups or individuals. If learning is indeed predicated on the learner then greater use of non-teacher directed learning activities should be encouraged and in the early primary years.

The advance toward a science of teaching reading is deterred most significantly, however, by a paucity of research in the area of instructional technique and by a concomitant indifference on the part of teachers of reading to evaluate their instructional practices in light of a significant number of pupil reading failures. Currently we are engaged in a search for grouping practices that will somehow reduce the range of difference in individual school units with a consequent reduction in the number of instructional groups to be served. Rarely can it be observed that an initial grouping on the basis of homogeneity of skill achievement results in personalization of instruction. It could be argued much more emphatically that such "by levels-by classroom" grouping patterns inevitably result in more uniform instruction reading practices. Unlike Shakespeare's Julius Caesar we insist on looking toward the stars when the fault is so obviously in ourselves.

We seem also to spend inordinate amounts of time seeking methodologies that are different or exotic...another reading game....a new practice

exercise format....a newer and more semantically unintelligible term for some time honored and simple reading activity. In our search for better reading programs we have often abandoned reading practices that have endured the years to become part of the conventional wisdom of our craft. We have forgotten or perhaps we have not realized that those human activities which have attained social respectability as sciences have done so by refining and extending a unique body of accumulated knowledge to accomodate and to resolve contemporary human problems. All too often when the reading curriculum base is changed effective methodologies of previous curriculum programs are abandoned. Effective methodology is effective methodology regardless of unique vocabulary content or sequence of skills to be acquired by the learner. We need to develop eclectic methodologies which are appropriate and effective for all learners and which utilize all neural sensory modal systems.

Such eclectic methodologies will occur when diagnosis of pupil deficiencies in reading is understood as part of developmental method, when there is systematic oral reading for diagnosis conducted daily in beginning reading programs and regular periods of oral reading for diagnosis conducted for pupils experiencing word recognition difficulties in upper primary or intermediate grades, when classroom and clinic practitioners utilize ancillary and supplementary instructional material that is integral to and complementary with the written vocabulary to be acquired and the skills to be mastered...when practitioners regard instructional and learning activities as processes for scholarly involvement and serious reflection. Without doubt effective reading method remains the

most serious impediment to improved schools and our emergence as a profession.

And yet schools are more than books, and skills, and duplicating masters, and workbooks.....schools are places of people, places of emotions, desires, personal and social relationships, values and ultimate human goals.

What of these that defy scientific definition and restriction?

What of these that are so basic to human learning and the application of learning?

What of these that are so newly discovered yet central to the religions and philosophies of all ages? Surely these too are central to all formal educational process.

For what is humanity without a soul?

I believe that emotional balance, restraint, and just application, human desires for truth, beauty and wisdom; human relationships of understanding, love and compassion, values of morality, integrity and ethical behavior cannot be taught. But they can be learned.

And that to my present level of understanding is what the art of teaching reading is all about.

From the advent of reason those who have quickened the most noble desires of mankind have done so by their own good example.

The architects of families, tribes, cities, provinces, states, nations, and civilizations have all taught by their own exemplary standards of personal and social behavior.

The poets, the artists, the generals, the kings and the carpenters have taught by example and deed.

And so in an age of uncertainty and change where so desperately there is need for change and improvement in the science of teaching reading some basic and fundamental human learning processes have not changed at all. The art of teaching reading remains so complex and yet so simple as the need for life itself, and so simple and yet so complex as the need for one another.