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LEADERS IN READING RESEARCH AND INSTRUCTION

Edited by

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AN INTERVIEW WITH JEANNETTE VEATCH

By Lyn Searfoss
January 28, 1987

Jeannette Veatch, professor emerita of Arizona State University, now lives in Mesa, Arizona. Dr. Veatch will celebrate her seventy-seventh birthday during 1987. Her work in using the language experience and individualized reading methods of teaching reading and writing is well-known. In this very personal interview with Lyndon W. Searfoss, Dr. Veatch both reminisces about her long career and reminds us that much remains to be done before her vision of literacy in today's schools is realized.

Q. How are we doing in schools today?

A. I certainly am not alone in feeling that we are in pretty terrible condition. The root of it, of course, lies in the domination of reading instruction by commercial interests. Those who believe in their products have effectively prevented the spread of alternatives to commercialization. The language experience approach, first described by Dorris May Lee and Lillian Lamoreaux years ago, got no where. The rise of Frank Smith, a seminal thinker in psycholinguistics, has developed into what is now called "whole language." I am critical because it is not clear to me how it differs from what I have always considered "language experience." Both, in my opinion, advocate the whole business of listening, hearing (which is different), speaking, reading, and writing. I don't need a new term, but the "whole language" folk think they do.

As you know, I wrote an article in last October's Language Arts that was a personal memoir as to what has happened to me, because I am so opposed to all forms of texts in the field of reading. I have, literally, made the term "individualized reading" a dirty word. It is now

"literature based approach" or who knows what else. Frank Smith, I think, has suffered for the same reason. He writes and speaks eloquently about using the child's own language as a base for developing literacy.

Smith's analysis of what is going on in schools is accurate. But he gets slapped down. Why? I think for the same reasons that I have been slapped down. We are nasty on our feet. We are unpleasant persons (to put it mildly) to those people who disagree with us ideologically, educationally, and philosophically. Thus, the alternatives we offer to the field of reading education are scorned, censored, and ignored. Whatever is wrong with reading today has to be laid at the feet of basal reading systems, as nothing else is even remotely on the road to as wide recognition and use in schools.

Q. Can you sketch, historically, those who personally understood what you were struggling to say in the early days of your work?

A. It wasn't important who understood what I was saying, as I was a minute speck on the education horizon until that fateful day in May, 1960, when I upended the International Reading Association, in meeting assembled (see Note 1). What it was, was me trying to figure out what beliefs I ascribed to. It took a bit of money in psychotherapy, but I think I have it worked out. So I have always been a "whistle blower." I can't stand unfairness, or brutality, and have never loved my bosses.

Since I was a depression graduate, there were no available jobs in my field of physical education. So my first class (and a sheer gift it was) was a second grade in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I had not a glimmer about how to teach second grade. So, I became a self-taught teacher with the help of friends. And that lead me on. It truly is the heart of my story, educationally speaking.

Whatever I am, is because I landed in the Grand Rapids, Michigan public schools. Their story is one of the unsung dramas of this nation's schools. Blessed with the appointment of a gifted educator, William Butler, selected teachers were sent, expenses paid, to the great Valhall of education, in the 1920's, Teachers College, Columbia. Never, I am sure, has there ever been a more exciting, productive, enriching, and more mind-boggling place for people who love to teach.

During those summers, the selected teachers from Grand Rapids taught and were taught at the Horace Mann Lincoln School. They studied under John Dewey, William Fitzpatrick, George Counts, John Childs, and others of only slightly lesser fame.

Back to Grand Rapids. We were forbade to have more than six copies of any one book. Workbooks and work sheets were used at one's peril (although some did). Every school had a complete workshop equipped to do woodwork, science experimentation, and a complete art room with walls made to put murals upon. A kitchen of ten small stoves (4 kids to a stove, meant you could cook a meal). Children were not allowed to give gifts to teachers in school, but we left our cars unlocked at Christmas time. Oh, it was glorious, and provocative! I crinkle on the back of my neck in recalling those days. No wonder I am evangelical

about teaching. Never have I had more fun and satisfaction.

Perhaps I had better mention those at Teachers College who helped promote those philosophies of Dewey, Kilpatrick, et al. There was Roma Gans in reading; Alice Keliher who (in 1932) wrote what is still the most devastating indictment of homogeneous ability grouping in all educational literature; the Pally Hill blocks are still referred to reverently by pre-schoolers; Satis Coleman in music without pain; Frederick Bonser, the man who felt that all children should understand the processes of society, and so helped teachers do units on electrical power--a friend of mine had her sixth graders make a dynamo from scratch that lit a Christmas tree bulb.

From these, and others a dozen came to be leaders; Laura Zirbes and Boyd Bode at Ohio State; Howard Lane, George Axtelle, Ernest Melby-- who just died recently at 92--at Northwestern; and, Ruth Strickland at Indiana. There are more. None of them wrote a basal series! From such as them, greatness is made.

So, when you asked me earlier how we are doing today; and I replied, "terrible," I am right. We are far behind those days. Things won't change, either, until somehow we break the terror of too many teachers who fear to leave the security blanket of the skills and drills of the manuals.

Q. Let me ask a related question about methods of teaching reading. If children have failed at some method, whatever that might be, it is popular in remedial circles to then bring language experience or individualized reading into the diagnostic, remedial setting. What are your feelings about that?

A. When nothing else works, of course, you have to use what you should have used in the first place! It is puzzling to me that of all the research published, that researchers do not recognize the overwhelming results in favor of language experience approaches. But, they do not.

You may be interested in my experience on American Samoa, in 1977, where I taught in the local community college, whose only entrance requirement was the attainment of the age of 18. Everything I believed in about teaching literacy came to pass there. To make a long story short, of the several hundred students we tested, one-third read at below the 3rd grade level, one-third read at 4th or 5th grade level, and the rest were 6th grade level or above. I was put in charge of that middle group for a six weeks session. Three hours a day were spent equally between reading, writing, and some kind of oral activity. No texts. No work sheets. We used 700 paperbacks which some blessed angel had ordered and left in the boxes until we, accidentally, found them. We did individualized reading. We dramatized stories, social situations. We wrote letters to real people: editors, family, lovers. Talk about whole language!

For the first time in the history of that college (American Samoa Community College) books were stolen! After the six weeks, the standardized tests revealed that we doubled the achievement level, and 21 of the 39 students were allowed to take their first college

freshman classes because they had risen to the 6th grade level of achievement.

Let me talk a bit about that kind of direct teaching. Popularly, direct teaching is considered to be teaching done when the teacher expects an immediate answer to a direct question, usually regurgitating some kind of fact. It is like dog obedience training for children. "Sit!" "Stay!" "Speak!" Such is the way, too, of the mastery learning programs. Of course, such barked responses of known content and knowledge is Hitlerian in character.

Another way to look at direct teaching is to draw a continuum of educational philosophy. At one end--on the left--would be laissez-faire, and on the right, totalitarianism. Laissez-faire activity, of course is all choice, nothing but. "Let-the-little-darlings-do-what-they-please," a la the nephew of Auntie Mame of Broadway and Hollywood fame. Such had no systematic plan, no organization, and no structure to accomplish anything. On the right is the totally structured, no-idea-tolerated except what came from the teacher's manual. In order for anything at all to happen, the teacher must resort to various strategies of "cheer leading," i.e., whooping it up artificially; or "persuasion," i.e., doing something because the teacher wants you do do it, or "force," i.e., no please about it.

Thus, when you hear me describing a systematic, structured plan of teaching based upon the inner drives, lives, or experiences of the pupils, you will understand that direct teaching has a different connotation for me than with others.

Sylvia Ashton Warner's Key Vocabulary is a classic example of a direct teaching that is democratic in nature. The structure of Key Vocabulary is of process, not of content as in mastery learning. It is highly individual and unique for each child. The teacher never knows what word is coming out! That is why it is not totalitarian. No brainwashing needed. Yet it is, I feel, direct teaching and cannot be done in a laissez-faire manner. If you don't do it right, you get words from the child that he thinks you want. Hence they are not his own. Hence he has been persuaded not to think for himself.

Direct teaching has its place when its structure brings about spontaneous original thought from the pupil. Direct teaching is Hitlerian when it is an example of operant conditioning: when there is no idea of one's own involved. When children have choices that can be brought out, worked on, expanded, and made exciting, we need to help them directly to do that. John Dewey always had that right. In short, you can't write a script for what children are to say and live in my kind of education. But you can write a script about how to get them to say what they want to say, and then move to making whatever that is better and better and better, in a truly educative sense.

Q. Who should we be reading and listening to today?

A. Let me first list some names from the past and discuss my personal assessment of them; then, I'll move to today's writers.

1. John Dewey. His books are still valid discussions of the best there is in education.
2. William Kilpatrick. His books still have current impact.
3. Boyd Bode. Unsurpassed yet different from Dewey and Kilpatrick. He is unique--and talk about the directed reading lesson.
4. Thomas Hopkins. His "Democracy and Education" is still the finest presentation of the philosophy I represent. It is at least 50 years old. But a goodie....
5. Jean Piaget. For some wonderful reason his thinking on one-to-one correspondences in number has made sense to Americans. I submit that the same principle applies to the alphabet as it does to counting. His thinking is still valid and important.

In recent years, I think that Frank Smith in reading is by far the ablest.

Marie Clay is a fine combination of a pragmatist who has a gift that I envy--she can talk the IRA lingo. And she knows what Smith, and I, et al, are trying to say.

At the risk of being accused of egoism, I think I, too, am one to read and listen to.

Donald Graves and his cohorts, especially Lucy McCormick Calkins. He has led the march that has destroyed, praises be, the dominance of reading as "the" language art.

Further, Kenneth and Yetta Goodman, Jerome Harste, Carolyn Burke and Virginia Woodward can be put in the same bag. They are providing leadership in what has come to be called "whole language." This is an outgrowth of "language experience" and I simply cannot see how the latter differs from the former.

A group from England has long been moving in the right direction and is lead by David Crystal. But the British infant school (New Zealand, too) is ahead of the USA in that writing predominates the literacy development approaches. Their middle schools are not much better, than ours, though. But, to their credit, they refuse to spend exorbitant sums upon expensive programs that require no teacher to be physically present.

Carol Chomsky has done important work based upon Charles Read's classic research on invented spelling. Again, writing is the prime mode to get children to become readers and writers.

There are surely others whose names are not uppermost in my mind. My worry, and is a large one, is that all of these fine thinkers and writers are proceeding in the right direction; but, they are seemingly unaware that, in my opinion, they are going in the direction of laissez-faire. They decry "direct teaching." They are going to blow it just like the old Progressive Education Association did. Every little darling cannot do his own thing by himself. Direct teaching based upon the inner life of the pupil must be part of life in the classroom. Indirect teaching, too, allows children to search on their own to an apex of learning.

success. But, I don't think children learn to make a capital "K" by osmosis and indirect teaching. Once in a while, children must be shown how!

Q. In retrospect, would you have changed your style so that the word of the educational changes you desire would have gotten out faster.

A. One would always hope to be better liked. I was abrasive to those with whom I disagree. But that was one change I did make. I am much more comfortable now with those on the other side of the educational fence. I always reacted to a situation as I found it. I got some marvelous breaks that led to national fame--or maybe infamy. But I was, as they say in the army, "point" man. I broke a log jam. The International Reading Association has never forgiven me, and as long as they are controlled so completely by the publisher/professor/psychologist complex they never will.

No, I don't think I could have changed even had I wanted to. I am, by nature, as I said earlier, a whistle-blower. And I love it. I am better at facing antagonism now than when I was younger. But, change? I regret not one whit that May 2nd day in 1960 in New York, where I made my name in 7 and 1/2 minutes. Now wouldn't you have liked such a chance?

I am not willing to change much in a major way. Smoother? Yup. More ladylike? Couldn't if I wanted to! I guess I can again be accused of being egotistical. I am reasonably satisfied with the way I am now. Reasonably.

Q. What are you up to in the coming months or year?

A. Having the most satisfaction and being busier than I have ever been in my life. Through the good luck of finding a super cameraman in a young man named Rene Willekens, I have organized the JAN V PRODUCTIONS. We are legally non-profit with the Internal Revenue Service. I got the initial idea from the being exercised about what I think are overpriced videotapes made by educators. So Rene has been taping me and other teachers who are teaching children the way we believe they should be taught. Our first release is a series of ten tapes called SHOWING TEACHERS HOW. It does just that. They are planned and edited, but they are unrehearsed and unscripted. I never "canned" a demonstration in my life, and am not about to now. They sell for about \$49.95, i.e., a quarter of the cost of other commercial tapes. I feel that at last I have found a way that I can leave for posterity my beliefs on teaching. These tapes will be just as good when I am dead and gone--and I will be 77 in a month--as they are now.

I know I am an incurable optimist. But that keeps me young! Schooling must get better. I do understand why changes are slow. I am patient with teachers who have the terror of change, or the ignorance of what to do. But I will never forgive those titans of the publishing world who are making money, and, in my considered opinion, damaging the best governmental system ever devised by man in order to sell their wares.

Go back to Thomas Jefferson. He did not have to face basal readers.

But he did know the thrill and excitement of discovering knowledge in our world. Knowledge that differs with each one of us. Knowledge that raises groups of people that live together onto a far higher plane. That is what is called civilization. It holds the fruits of a good life, and in this year of our celebration of our Constitution, the pursuit of happiness. I have found it. I wish it for all.

Note 1 - Veatch, J. (1986). Individualized reading: A personal memoir. Language Arts, 63, 586-593.

In this article, Dr. Veatch sketches her most vivid memories of the origin and development of the term individualized reading. It is, in the truest sense, "vintage Veatch!"