

TO URGE THE REPETITION OF THE AYRES' SPELLING TESTS OF 1914-15 TO
CONFIRM THE EXISTENCE OF MASSIVE PRESENT-DAY READING DISABILITY
AND TO ESTABLISH ITS CAUSE AND CURE

by Geraldine Rodgers
June 22, 1983

A child's education is almost totally wasted unless he can read. It is on the crumbling cornerstone of simple reading that American education has collapsed. The word, "read," should have the same sense as the word, "listen." This is the precise sense in which it is used by the Soviet psychologist, D. B. Elkonin:

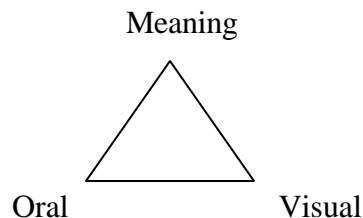
...reading is a reconstitution of the sound forms of a word on the basis of its graphic representation. Understanding, which is often considered as the basic content of the process of reading arises as a result of correct recreation of the sound forms of words. He who, independently of the level of understanding of words, can correctly recreate their sound forms is able to read.

So Elkonin defines reading as the ability to "listen" to print as we can "listen" to speech. Probably because of this simple definition of reading, Russia does not even teach "reading comprehension" which we teach even in college. Russia is FINISHED with reading in first grade, yet Russia has NO reading problem, while we have a massive one. They are obviously doing something which we are not, and it is how they teach children to read.

The late Dr. Hilde L. Mosse, the German-American psychiatrist/psychologist pediatrician, referred specifically to Russian Pavlovian psychology in connection with establishing the proper automatic "conditioned reflexes" in reading. Dr. Mosse said:

Reading disorders can be caused by an inability to form the necessary conditioned reflexes or by the establishment and practice of wrong reflexes.

These reflexes - the right and the wrong ones - can be illustrated on this triangle, taken from an illustration in an article by Columbia Professor Suzzallo in the 1913 Cyclopedia of Education. On the triangle, "visual" at the lower right is the sight of the print, "oral" at the lower left is its sound, and "meaning" at the top of the triangle is the ultimate meaning of the print. A child should be taught to go clockwise on this triangle, if the Russian Elkonin's view of reading is correct, from the sight of the print (visual) to its sound (oral) and only AFTERWARDS to its meaning. To do so would be to establish the proper conditioned reflex.



It is startling to learn, therefore, that since about 1930 American school children have been taught to go in precisely the OPPOSITE fashion, the counterclockwise route. They look at print, see whole sight words (without reference to their sound) and then guess unknown sight words from the meaning of the context. Obviously, they are going directly from “visual” to “meaning”, which is a route by which deaf-mutes were taught reading for centuries: by hanging word signs on things in their environment, which signs they came to recognize solely by their meaning (since sound was closed to them). The only “phonics” used in American basal readers is usually partial; the use of one or two letters to confirm the context-guess. This kind of phonics goes on the counterclockwise route, THROUGH meaning: first the sight of the print, then its “meaning,” and then “oral” or phonics, to confirm the sight-word guess. Such phonics is still on the counterclockwise route, and, if the Russian Elkonin is correct, still part of the wrong conditioned reflex.

One of the most influential of the present reading experts in America and Canada, Frank Smith, speaks of phonics as the “great fallacy” in beginning reading instruction. He said, “I shall argue that sound, if it is produced at all, comes only after the comprehension of meaning in reading.” This quote, from a highly regarded expert, should establish quite clearly that the present, accepted, “psycholinguistic” method of teaching reading in American schools is the counterclockwise route on the reading triangle, and in all probability is the cause of the establishment and practice of wrong reflexes which is at the root of our present reading difficulties.

America once had almost no reading difficulties. Spelling is only the obverse of reading. In 1914-1915, Leonard Ayres tested 70,000 children in 84 American cities on a list of the 1,000 commonest words in spelling. He tested classes from the second to the eighth grade. In 1914 and 1915, most children had to stay in school until age 14 or at least to sixth grade, so his scores for sixth grade should be representative of almost every child at or near sixth grade age in America at that time. His results showed that NINETY-NINE PER CENT of those sixth grade children in 1915 could spell these words in DICTATED, not printed recognition spelling tests:

became, brother, rain, keep, start, mail, eye, glass, party, upon, two, they, would, any, could, should, city, only, where, week, first, sent mile, seem, even, without, afternoon, Friday, hour, wife, state, July, head, story, open, short, lady, reach, better, water, round, cost, price, became, class, horse, care, try, move, delay, pound, behind, around, burn, camp, bear, clear, clean, spell, poor, finish, hurt, maybe, across, tonight, tenth, sir, these, club, seen, felt, full, fail, set, stamp, light, coming, cent, night, pass, shut, easy.

Except in rare cases, children who can spell words in dictated spelling tests can READ those words. It is obvious America had NO reading problem, as we know it, in 1914 and 1915. We were in the fortunate position THEN that the Russians are NOW, because we were developing the right conditioned reflexes with true phonics - not “guessing” partial phonics (the counterclockwise route). True phonics means to teach children to blend consonants and vowels into syllables which then produce words. Phony phonics means to guess at whole words and then confirm the guess with some consonant (and occasionally some vowel) sounds, and the fewer the letter sounds used, the better. One of the leading (if not the leading) basal series in America today actually boasts that children use as few letters as possible, to confirm their context guesses on unknown words.

It is urgent that the Ayres spelling tests of 1914 and 1915 once again are given in America - preferably to the same number of children in the same grades and the same cities: 70,000 children from grades 2 to 8 in 84 American cities. The norms on the 1983 tests can then be compared to the norms on the 1914-1915 tests. They should establish quite clearly whether or not the deaf-mute, counterclockwise conditioned reflex being taught in America today is resulting in reading (and spelling) disabilities when compared to the results achieved when America, in general, taught true phonics (the clockwise conditioned reflex.) By demonstrating the great harm done by the psycholinguistic sight-word readers, it should be possible to forbid their use in our schools ..., as was done in the Canton of Geneva, in Switzerland almost thirty years ago, in 1955, when they banned the global-sight word method. I urge that the Ayres tests be repeated, exactly as they were given in 1914 and 1915, to demonstrate the failure of present reading instruction and the urgency of immediate reform.

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In 1977-78, while on sabbatical leave, Miss Rodgers tested the oral reading of approximately 900 second graders in their own languages in America, Sweden, Germany, Holland, Austria, Luxembourg and France, and 115 sixth graders in Holland and Sweden. Her test results showed the existence of perceptual types in readers (differing conditioned reflexes) which resulted from differing methods used in beginning reading.

In 1982, Miss Rodgers presented results of heavy library research on the historical basis for our reading problems at a workshop at the Toronto Convention of the Reading Reform Foundation.

In July, 1983, Miss Rodgers will present another workshop at the Indianapolis Convention of the Reading Reform Foundation, with the title, "The Flat Earth of American Reading Instruction," based on heavy historical research.

She has also written two unpublished books: Why Jacques, Johann and Jan CAN Read, and The Case for the Prosecution, in the Trial of Silent Reading Comprehension Tests. She has written two articles, printed by Reading Reform Foundation (one in their journal, The Reading Informer), "The Wary Reader's Guide to Psycholinguistics: Subjective vs. Objective Readers," and "An Article prepared in Answer to a Series in a Local Newspaper: Why Can't Johnny Read?"

She has been a primary grade school teacher in Wayne, New Jersey, for the past twenty years.

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald Potter
July 19, 2004

Geraldine Rodgers sent me her materials on the *Ayres Measuring Scale for Ability in Spelling* at the end of August, 2003. Professional duties prevented me from preparing the materials for publication on the donpotter.net web site until now. **It is most unfortunate that Ms. Rodgers' proposal** to give the Ayres' spelling test to 70,000 children from grades 2 to 8 in the same 84 American cities where the original test was given and to compare these norms with the norms on the 1914-1915 spelling test **was ignored** by the Federal Government. Perhaps the time is now ripe for such a project.

Ms. Rodgers informs me, "This material was given 20 years ago, on June 22, 1983 in New York City at the *National Institute of Education (Federal Government) Competitive Hearings on Proposed Research Projects* at which the public was permitted to testify. I never received any acknowledgment of any kind from the Agency."

Leonard P. Ayres' *A Measuring Scale for Ability in Spelling* is available for FREE download on the donpotter.net web site. I have also published a separate file of invaluable historical materials that Ms. Rodgers assembled in 1983 for an introduction to Ayres' work. Click on: [Historical Introduction to Leonard P. Ayres' A Measuring Scale for Ability in Spelling \(1915\)](#)

Materials for teaching reading "from the sounds" are available for FREE download on the donpotter.net web site. Other articles by Ms. Rodgers are available on my web site. Be sure and read her major works on the history of beginning reading in America available at AuthorHouse.com

For a more detailed explanation of "The Reading Triangle," see the article by the same name on my web site: donpotter.net.