Reading, Teaching Beginners

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READING, TEACHING BEGINNERS. –

The purpose of teaching children to read is to give them the power to acquire thought from the printed or written page. In actual school practice the dominant aim may go beyond thought getting to expression, when oral rendition becomes the chief purpose of instruction. This is often the case in the intermediate and grammar grades. It may fall short of thoughtful reading in the primary grades, where the mechanics of pronunciation and spelling obtrude themselves as a difficulty from the very beginning, and gain disproportionate attention from both teacher and child at every step. Ready silent reading which gives the pupil mastery of meaning should be made the primary end; oral reading, whether for mastery of the mechanics of pronunciation or for fostering skill in expression, is a secondary consideration. The phonetic interpretation of printed words is merely an accessory in getting thought, and no technical training in vocal intonation can be successful unless the meaning to be expressed is thoroughly grasped. That these relations between fundamental aims and accessory skills have not been maintained in actual schoolroom procedures is apparent to the most casual student of contemporary teaching. The fixed traditions of the profession have been against such a view. The most active battle ground in the reform of school teaching is found in the primary grades, particularly in the first school year where beginners are taught to read. The mistakes committed there have persisted through the grades, and the reconstructions successfully established there have quickly influenced higher teaching. A discussion of the problem of teaching beginners to read is, therefore, crucial.

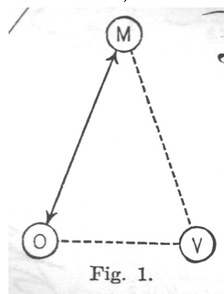

Fig. 1.

Effective reading depends upon the association of three factors: (1) The meaning which the word or words symbolize, (2) the visual form of the word, and (3) the pronunciation of it. (See Fig 1.) *M* = meaning; *V* = visual or printed form of word; *O* = oral form or pronunciation.

The child who enters school for the first time is not ignorant of all these factors. He has had a considerable amount of experiences (*M*) with which he has already associated the appropriate words, phrases, and sentences of speech (*O*). He lacks only a knowledge of the third factor, the printed forms (*V*), which are to be associated with the experience and speech, in consequence the school's first effort has been to supply the missing association between the printed form and the pronunciation (Fig. 1). If the words on the page were within the spoken vocabulary of the child, their meanings would be recognized if the child could be given the power to convert what he sees into sound. (Fig 2.). In consequence the schools of the last century have largely aimed to teach children to render print words into sound (the mechanics of reading) on the faith that an already existing association between pronunciation and meaning would complete the pathway to meaning. In the natural course of events, it was assumed, the association would become a direct one between print and meaning. (Fig. 3). The effort to solve the

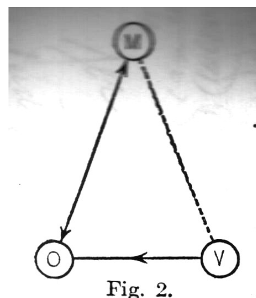

Fig. 2.

problem by this approach through sound has lead to the development of a long series of so-called *phonics methods.*

The earliest of the phonic methods was the *alphabetic method*. The children learned the alphabet so they could identify the letter by its name. Then the child would, in a very rough way, convert the familiar word (cat) into its alphabetic name units, obtaining a very rough suggestion of the sound of the word (see-ay-tee). Such reading by spelling was further assisted by syllabic drills (ay-be ab; bee-ay ba; etc.)

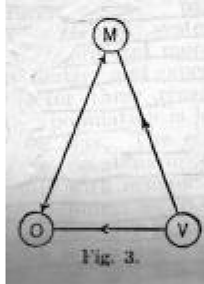

Fig. 3.

The crudity of such alphabetic spelling was apparent, and a more refined method of phonic spelling soon came into vogue. In this method the letters of a word are spelled by their elementary sounds, not by their alphabetic names. Then the elementary sounds associated with the letters are blended into a pronunciation of the word. But silent letters, single letters with more than one sound, and several letters grouped to represent a single sound interfered with the *phonic method.* By a very careful selection of words such difficulties could be avoided but not for long. In consequence this simple phonic method gave way to more complicated *phonic methods*. An attempt was made to give each sound its own characteristic symbol. This was done in two ways: (1) Additional characters were contrived so that forty-four or more characteristics for the various sounds were kept similar in general appearance, but differentiated in detail for each sound value. Silent letters were printed in hair lines. (2) The usual twenty-six letter characters were reserved and the differentiations were made by placing a diacritical mark above or below the regular symbol. The second method does not attempt to reconstruct printing so much as to provide a more accurate identification during the learning period. Psychologically, however, the diacritical method provides as many phonetic characters as the *extended alphabet method*. In either case the child has finally to learn to pronounce words without these special and artificial aids, which involve two forms of a single pronunciation, and increase the child's task of memorization.

A reaction against reading words as they are not presented in books was inevitable. Here and there the reformers still believing in a phonic method, attempted to teach children to read in a less artificial way. Some went back to the syllable as a basis, the increasing the unit of attack, and avoiding the difficulties of alphabetic and phonetic spelling of words. But the syllable is an inflexible unit which does not with sufficient frequency correspond to the child's natural way of analyzing or building words (num-ber *versus* n-um-b-er); nudge *versus* n-udge, etc.). The search for a larger, more flexible, and less artificial method culminated in the use of the phonogram or natural sound unit: (l-ight, g-ood, m-an-li-ness), and the *phonogrammic method* quickly supplanted the *syllabic method.*

Many advantages are claimed for the phonogrammic method: (1) It separates words purely on the basis of their sound division, avoiding the units of the syllabic method which are determined by philological derivation or conventional practice. (2) It is more flexible as it can take into account the maturity and individuality of children. (h-um-ble-n-ess, humble-ness, etc.). (3) It tends on the whole to induce the child to see the word elements in the largest possible units of identification making sound approximations more accurate and sound blending more easy. (4) It treats irregular words (the chief bugabear of phonic methods) as a phonogrammic unit or sight word (thought). Though not inherent in the method itself, teachers who use the phonogrammic method find it less necessary to depend on diacritic marks, accents, printed word divisions, and all other artificial devices that give words a different appearance from that which they have in normal use.

It is to be noted that the evolution of phonic methods show several important tendencies which in themselves are indicative of the fallacies which underline the work of those who have stressed the method of word-sound translation as the chief means of teaching reading to beginners. They are as follows: (1) These methods are chiefly synthetic at the start, but tend to become an analytic-synthetic method. First, the child is given the alphabet and the name; and then builds the word from the units. Later with the phonogram breaks the word up into familiar sight units that are natural to him and then breaks them a pronunciation of the word. (2) The unit for handling sounds grows larger: Letter, syllable, phonogram, sight word. (3) There is a decreasing artificiality in the teaching devices employed; note the abolition of diacritics, marks, etc. (4) The use of larger units and more natural methods frees the child's attention from mere phonetic translation to focus in larger degree on the meaning he is trying to obtain from his reading.

But there is a fundamental fallacy underlying the premise which has led to this dependence on phonic methods in teaching beginners to read. It has been assumed that children would gain meaning from their reading if they could translate the printed words into correct pronunciations (Figs. 2, 3). This seems a reasonable assumption when the words used in reading are within the experience and [One line missing at bottom of photocopy] this is the case, children, so much engrossed with the mere mechanical translation of symbols into sound, hardly let their normal associations enter into their thought; they become mere pronounceers, the "parrot-readers" known to every school system. But the reading material more and more tend to be outside the vocabulary and experience of first-grade children, for three reasons: (1) Our American school population is less homogeneous than it once was. The experiences and consequently the vocabularies of young children vary greatly with economic and cultural situation and geographical location. The modern primer is not effective in giving a vocabulary common to urban and rural pupils, the children of the rich and the poor. (2) The problem is still further complicated by the large number of school children who are foreign born or American born with foreign parents. These do not have a command of oral English, and getting the sound of words does not lead to their meanings. The large number of foreign children who have recently entered our country and our schools has been the largest single factor in revealing the futility of methods of teaching reading in the American receiving classes. (3) Finally, the pedagogical movement which has fostered the reading of children's classics in the lower grades, instead of presenting matter thoroughly familiar to the child, has introduced a host of new words outside their life and speech. Under these conditions the traditional phonic methods, in spite of their improvement, have become less and less adequate; and other methods designed to focus attention on the direct connection between printed word and meaning have grown in favor.

These so-called *thought methods* have always been used. In a sense they are our oldest methods. But in conscious pedagogical theory they are more recent than the phonic methods already discussed. There are three types of thought methods: (1) the *sentence method*, (2) the *phrase method*, and (3) the *word method*. The *sentence method* assumes that the sentence-whole is the real unit of thought, speech, and pronunciation. Often the sentences are the produce of the child's own experience and speech, and are written down on a blackboard as they are spoken in description of a picture, object, or action, or in narration of a story. The child reads these sentences naturally, as they express reality. Sentences with similar beginnings and different endings (or vice versa) are laced in a row and read. Specific phrases or words thus come to be associated with their own form, their particular pronunciation, and their meaning. Words are similarly treated in the derivation of words parts. The *phrase method* is less often mentioned, as

the thought method of teaching reading has been discussed in terms of the sentence and word method. It has been a stage in supplementation of the sentence method when identification of part of sentences or words was desired before proceeding to phonic analysis. It has been necessary as a supplement to the word method, inasmuch as the meaning of certain parts of speech (prepositions, conjunctions, etc.) is not easily obtained save in context ("to the door," etc.). The *word method*, which is probably older than the sentence method is our conscious method theory, appeared as a conspicuous protest against the tedious and mechanical phonetic methods of traditional practice. Here the total visual form of the word is associated with its whole sound, the assumption being that it is about as easy to learn a word unit as a letter unit. This view holds that the pronunciation of a word is not a sum of its letter sounds, but has its own character as a unit. So the word method is held to be more economical and natural as a mode of teaching. All these assumptions are born out by the conclusions of experimental psychologist. Teaching children to read by words is undoubtedly the chief simple method utilized by progressive teachers, thought almost always supplemented by others. Some phonic work is almost always associated with it to give the pupil power to pronounce unfamiliar words by himself.

The word method, like all the phonic methods, usually tries to bridge the gap between print and meaning through mastery of the pronunciation, usually given by the teacher in association with the visual form. But like all the other thought methods it is less likely to ignore meanings. The word method has been used in getting direct association between things and their visual symbols, with the oral symbols somewhat subordinated. The association of printed names with pictures on blocks and in books is a characteristic example of this emphasis. The labeling of every possible thing and situation in a child's nursery is an attempt to employ the same means. The word method alone does not give the child power to read. The words must be recognized as they are grouped in sentences. In consequence the word method is seldom used in isolation from the sentences any more than is the phonic method. In establishing procedures starting from parts and proceeding to large word units, the *thought method* have been characteristically analytic. In recent years the method of progressive teachers has been a complex blend, both analytic and synthetic. Familiar sentences are made basic, then phrases are isolated, then words, phonograms, and consonants. Then with some preliminary work in word building or blending of new words, the children's power of identifying the sound of words has been extended by practice to the recognition of new words, phrases, and sentences made up of familiar units. The complete analytic-synthetic process is not prolonged over weeks, but occurs within a single lesson unit, the first and last exercises of the children being with large combinations expressing real thought. Naturalness everywhere characterizes its procedure. The children's old experiences are used whenever possible, and a multiplicity of artificial devices is done away with. The method of deriving sounds is a good example of increasing naturalness and economy. For example, the sound *r*, which in the *Johnny Story* of an older synthetic-phonic method was derived by imitation of a dog's growl, is now merely the first sound of the well-known word "rat," which is pronounced more and more slowly until the sound and the symbol of *r* are isolated, or the common initial element in a list of familiar words beginning with *r* (rat, run, race, rage, etc.) which is emphasized through the repetition of itself and variation of its phonogrammic affixes. Again the diacritical marks are almost crowded out of use by the phonogram. Those memorized are chiefly the long vowel sounds. More are not needed for dictionary reference because children are taught to get the sound by analogy from the familiar words at the bottom of the dictionary page.

Inevitably the sentences and word methods have given greater emphasis to real reading for thought. Modern tendency has not been content with that improvement alone. The reading period has ceased to be formal and has become and has become enriched with interesting content. The better teachers have not been willing to take much for granted in the way of experience and oral vocabulary. At any rate, they have tested to see that the necessary basis in experience and vocabulary is present. They have preceded the reading of text with story telling, conversational lessons, picture writing, and actual work. If the children did not seem to have the basis, it was at once provided through, objects, pictures, games, dramatization, etc. Then oral reading was successful.

The meaningless subject matter of the primers, devised chiefly for formal drill in phonics, and neglecting all appeal to the children's interests, is largely disappearing. The interesting episodes of child life replace them. Children's classics enter – the jingles and rhymes of Mother Goose, the fairy tale, the myth, the animal story, easily memorized songs and poems. The formal reading texts are supplemented by other reading books so that there is no lack of interesting material to give vitality and motive to the children's reading. If there must be formal exercises, they are a subordinating activity paralleling the reading for thought, which is the central occupation of the pupils. Oral reading is a little less conspicuous in the first grade than it was. Quick silent reading with the whole centered upon getting ideas has displaced it somewhat. At first the children tell what they have learned, in their own words or by acting it out. Later, they read the thoughts to others, more expressively than children used to because they have better things to read. They have more motive for studying their lessons and reading aloud to their fellow pupils, for reading lessons are more often assigned to groups instead of to the whole class as before. The "letter-by-letter" stuttering or the halting "word-by-word" pronunciation is avoided by emphasizing thought rather than form. A natural speed and phrasing is obtained because present methods favor these habits from the beginning. As an additional safeguard, concert reading has been abandoned.

There are other problems in teaching beginners to read. But most of them are less important in current discussion than those already mentioned. Some prefer to begin reading from script, later passing to print. Others prefer an exclusive use of print from the beginning so as to lessen the number of forms which the child must master, thus decreasing attention to formal work. There are teaches who prefer no beginning text, no basal readers with a systematic treatment of phonetic difficulties. These insist that all children read at first should be associated with their own lives, so that reading is merely appreciating in visual form what children comprehend, and use in speech. Only later, when phonetic difficulties are fairly well mastered, should new experiences come thought the printed symbol. Still others stress quiet, silent reading, making it the goal of all their efforts. The relative amount of prepared and sight work is another ground for controversy. The solution to all these minor problems hinges on the larger questions already suggested and treated.

H. S.

Reference: -

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Notes from Donald Potter - Internet Publisher

This preceding article on "beginning reading instruction" was written by Henry Suzzallo and published in 1913 in *A Cyclopedia of Education*, edited by Paul Monroe, Ph.D. I am publishing Suzzallo's article in the interest of American educational history and as background for a better understanding of Geraldine Rodgers' explanation and application of the "Reading Triangle," which is grew out of her realization that Suzzallo's triangle pointed to two **different** and **opposite** ways of reading. More information on "The Reading Triangle" can be found in Miss. Rodgers' books available at 1stbooks.com, and her critique of contemporary brain research, "BornYesterday Reading Experts," available for free down load on the Education page of my web site, www.donpotter.net. I also have a short paper entitled "The Reading Triangle."

I am **not** publishing Suzzallo's article because I think he is correct in his assessment of the proper contribution of psychology to good beginning reading instruction; but quite the contrary, his article is a good example of how a brilliant and articulate mind can jump to **false conclusions** based on faulty premises.

The following biographical information was taken from a *Biographical Dictionary of American Educators*, edited by John F. Ohles

SUZZALLO,Henry. B- August 22, 1875, San Jose, California, Peter and Anne (Suzzallo) Suzzallo. M. February 8, 1912, to Edith Moore. Ch. none. D. September 25, 1933, Seattle, Washington

The son of poor Portuguese immigrants, Henry Suzzallo worked his way through school and became a leading figure in American education. He received the A.B. degree (1899) from Stanford (California) University and the A.M. (1902) and Ph.D. (1905) degrees from Columbia University.

Suzzallo was a principal of California schools (1896-97and 1899-1901), instructed at Stanford from 1902, and was lecturer (1903-05) at Columbia University and deputy superintendent of San Francisco public schools for five months in 1903, 1904, and 1907. He was an instructor and lecturer at California normal schools in San Francisco (1902-03) and San Jose (1905-07). He was an assistant professor of education at Stanford (1905-07), adjunct professor of elementary education (1907-09), and professor of the philosophy of education (1909-15)

In 1915 Suzzallo was selected president of the University of Washington in Seattle. He successfully led the University of Washington to a position as a major educational institution. He planned the development of the physical plant, began an extensive building program, and sought public funds to support the university. His aggressive efforts to improve financial support led to his dismissal by the governor of Washington in 1926.

Suzzallo lectured in Europe on American education for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (1926-28). He was a specialist in higher education for the foundation (1927-29), director of the National Advisory Committee on Education (1929-30), and president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching from 1930 to his death.

A contributor to professional journals, Suzzallo was editor of the Riverside Educational Monographs from 1909. He was active in professional associations as a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, president of the National Association of State Universities (1921-22), director of the American Federation of the Arts, a member of the Annals editorial committee of the American Academy of Political and Social Science and the committee on higher education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools (1929-33), and a member at large of the division of states' relations of the National Research Council (1919-23). He was a trustee of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of the Teaching, and chairman of the board (1926-33), the Carnegie Corporation of New York (1926-33), and Stevens Institute of Technology (1927-33). He was a member of advisory boards to the universities of Denver and Wyoming and Colorado College and was a member of the Washington state boards of education and vocational education. He received honorary degrees from several American universities and was decorated by the government of Italy. The library at the University of Washington was dedicated to his memory shortly after his death.

REFERENCES: DAB; LE (I); NCAB (C:21, 24:39); NYT, September 26, 1933, p. 21; WWAE (IV); WWW (I) *School and Society* 38 (September 30, 1933): 440; "Dr. Henry Suzzallo," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* August 1, 1975, p. A4 Michael A. Balasa