

Myths of Reading Instruction – and why they live so long

by Dr. Patrick Groff
Professor of Education
San Diego (CA) State University

It's always a pleasure to come to your meetings and have the opportunity to talk to the people.

The text of my talk tonight is "The Myths of Reading Instructions," and it is the result of writing a book for the NIE, the National Institute of Education.

The kinds of statements that have been bothering me, that I have been writing about, are such as these that I am quoting from the paper that I wrote. I read so often, and hear so often, that everybody is in favor of teaching phonics. There isn't anybody that is opposed to it. All of the people who know anything about it are in favor of it. But these are quotes from books and from magazine articles, for instance:

"The usual phonics instruction is likely to do more harm than good."

"In phonics teaching the child will be hindered from learning to read."

"Phonics is the least successful approach to teaching word acquisition."

"Some students seem to be able to decode beautifully, but, when questioned, apparently understand little that they have read."

"Ironically, the students who are the most obedient in following our instructions to sound out words are destined to have the most trouble understanding what they read."

"Only a few of the frequently taught phonics rules are consistent enough, or related enough, to make them worthwhile teaching."

"It would be difficult to exaggerate the complexity and unreliability of phonics."

"Learning to read is as natural as learning to understand speech."

"No direct phonics teaching is needed since children will develop their own rules, much as they did when learning to speak."

These are just a sample of the kinds of things I found. I have three pages of them, I think, in the introduction of my paper, that lead me to this attempt to come up with what I call the "Myths of Reading Instruction."

There really is an anti-phonics movement.

There are people who really, truly, honestly believe the best way to teach children to read is exactly the way they learned to speak—simply by surrounding them with a stock-pile, a mass of written words and sort of letting them sort through and find their own way. All the teacher can do is simply give them the names of these words, and the children will come up with their own devices and ways of working with them. On the basis of that, I tried to work out this paper.

I have 11 of what I call "Myths of Reading Instruction." Following that I have tried to work out logically 11 different reasons why these "Myths of Reading Instruction" are perpetuated. Following that I have three solutions, (I wish I could come up with some more) for dispelling these so-called "Myths of Reading Instruction."

Myth No. 1

The first one is that **phonics interferes with comprehension**. Now, that's the big one. If you could prove that, you'd have the phonics people where it hurts. If you can prove that phonics interfered with comprehension, the ballgame is over. It's the ninth inning and you can close up shop. In my paper I quote a lot of different statements to that effect, that if you teach phonics you'll interfere with children's understanding of what they read. It is charged that the typical phonics person is a teacher who is so obsessed with teaching phonics that he or she forgets all about the ultimate aim of reading which is, of course, to understand or comprehend the material being read. I can't find any evidence that any of this is so.

In fact, in my paper, I have over 100 different references to reviews of the research by the people who have examined the research carefully. These are scholars from different fields: linguistics, language and education, etc. I have over 100 of those and from that there are 35 that say that it is really not true that the intensive teaching of phonics interferes with children's ability to comprehend. In fact it works, probably, just the opposite way. You can teach children phonics well enough so they can understand it and apply it in a proficient way, an automatic way, a way for them to apply it almost unconsciously. It aids their comprehension. It contributes to their comprehension, rather than interferes with it.

Myth No. 2

The second myth that's bandied around a great deal is that **the English language is spelled so unpredictably that phonics really can't work**. Whatever you're trying to do in the teaching of phonics is so confusing later on for the child because he runs up against so many different kinds of words that are unpredictably spelled, that are not spelled regularly or are not spelled phonetically, so that all you are doing is creating a mass of confusion for him. That's one of the reasons given that phonics shouldn't be taught, especially intensive phonics; and that you shouldn't depend on trying to teach phonics thoroughly enough so that children can exercise it in an automatic way.

Believe it or not, I couldn't find any study that dealt with this problem of whether or not phonics gets children close enough to the pronunciation of words so that then they can use whatever they know about language, to figure out what the word in question is. Nobody has really ever investigated that, the only thing that I could guess would be that the people who have said that English spelling is so unpredictable, that phonics can't work, have never paused to ask themselves, "What if phonics teaching gets the child close enough to the word's pronunciation, in other words gives him an approximation of the word's pronunciation, that's nearly enough like the true pronunciation, so that then the child, with other clues from the sentence, can figure out the word himself?"

I asked many teachers (part of my job is going around and supervising student teachers), "Do you think that's what happens with your kids when you are teaching them?" They always say, "Yes, sure that happens. The kids will get close and they'll guess. They'll get close enough and then they'll be able to figure it out on their own."

Some few people have said that that likely happens. These were mostly linguists, by the way, who said that. Very seldom did I ever find an educationist who ever said this would happen. So I took it upon myself to try and investigate. What I did was read aloud to children a passage that had words like “find” and “give” in it. If we have “find” we normally, according to the rules of phonics, would pronounce the word “finned,” Instead of “find,” because it is a closed syllable and we have a short sound. I think most of us would agree. With “give” it would be the opposite, we’d say “guyve,” wouldn’t we, because it has an e marker on the end that signals a long sound?

So I read the passage to a bunch of second grade kids, and I deliberately mispronounced “give” and “find.” I told them ahead of time, “This is going to sound funny. See if you can figure it out and give me what you think the real word is.” Out of the hundreds of responses I got from the kids, only 7% of those responses were in error. I got a 93% success rate.

If that’s anything like what happens when a child looks at a word, tries to sound it out, gives an approximation of the word from that, and then goes on and guesses, if it’s anything like that, I think we’ve got something. I don’t know whether it is exactly like that and I can’t prove it. The only thing I can surmise is that we do have some evidence that oral language and reading operate in many ways in similar fashion. If that is what happens, it’s going to be a great boost for the teaching of phonics because it suggests that we teach more rules, rather than fewer rules.

Back in the 1960’s Ted Clymer came up with a list of phonics rules. He said that if the phonics rules only work for a small percentage of the time, we shouldn’t continue to use them or teach them. He set up a standard that a phonics rule has to operate 75% of the time with the corpus of words you’re using or else you shouldn’t teach it.

My findings would suggest that that isn’t a true or an accurate or a useful kind of generalization. What we should probably do, my evidence says, is teach as many possible phonics rules as we can, to completely load the child up with this kind of information and understanding and ability to use these kinds of things and he or she will do the rest. They’ll come up to a word and make a fairly good guess, and if it doesn’t hit it right on the nose—whatever the phonics rule they’re trying to apply—they’ll go ahead and do it on their own.

Myth No. 3

The third myth, I think, is **sight words**. We mentioned that before. This is the **heart**, of course, of the “look-say” notion and the anti-phonics notion, that children somehow learn words as wholes. Seldom does anyone say, “What do you mean, you recognize a word by a whole? What does that mean? How are the wholes recognized?” They never take that second step, they just say somehow a child looks at a word without making any analysis—any analysis of the constituent letters of the word, any parts of the word—and then goes ahead and recognizes that word. The supposition is that you learn a whole lot of these kinds of sight words and then you go on and get some other sorts of things if it’s necessary—maybe a minimal amount of phonics. For years the “look-say” method worked on that supposition. Again, I can’t find any supporting evidence. It seems to me all the evidence points in the opposite direction, that right from the beginning children are very avidly working for clues in words, some sort of clues that they can use, mostly letters or

groups of letters. As they progress, they use clusters of letters. They'll even tell people who have asked them, "How did you recognize that word?" that they used a little cluster of letters inside a word. Oftentimes these are phonograms, closed syllables that they are using. But they're simply not looking at the outline of the word. I took the very frequently used words, and I drew little boxes around them. My point was to try to find out how many of those little boxes were dissimilar, not the same but dissimilar. I only found about 20% of a list of very highly or frequently-used words that had different shapes. So if a child is using the general configuration of a word, you see, the evidence wouldn't support that at all. **I just don't think there's anything to support the notion that there are any such things as sight words.** The definitions of what a sight word is vary greatly, of course, but the one I'm talking about; here is the common one that's given. It's a word the child can recognize from the beginning without making any analysis of any of its parts. It's just like a miracle.

Myth No. 4

The fourth myth is that **we should teach reading by sentences.** We do have some very strong feeling about that now. One of the popular ones is the 'immersion method', in which you read aloud to a child, and he follows along with his eyes. Follows along what? I don't know, but supposedly follows along the same copy that you are reading aloud from. Soon he's able to recognize some of the words, so you stop and say, "Who knows the next word?" Somehow the child has picked up that word, and fairly soon after that you say, "Who would like to try to read the next sentences?" Fairly soon, according to this theory and proposition, all the kids are independent readers. You don't need to worry about teaching them anything about the spelling system or how the sounds of language and letters correspond or anything like that. It seems to me the evidence is overwhelming in the other direction. This method is such a gross kind of description of what we call the "look-say" program. Under this system, of course, they argue very strongly that there is no such thing as a set of subskills that children have to learn, there's absolutely no hierarchy of skills. You don't start anywhere. There's no need to start anywhere, of course, in that sort of system, it's all just happenstance.

The thing that bothers me basically is that whenever people have tried to test children's knowledge of words and children's knowledge of sentences and paragraphs, they get very high correlation. I found that I had to really dig to find that information. I had to write letters to all of the test manufacturers to ask each one of them, "Have you ever done anything like that? Have you found correlations between the ability of children to read the isolated words in your test versus the ability to read sentences and paragraphs?"

Some of them had and they sent me those correlations which are higher probably than any that we can find in the whole field of reading research. Clear up in the high 80s and low 90s. You just don't get those kinds of correlations between any sorts of studies that we make between reading factors.

Myth No 5.

My fifth myth is the **wild claims made for context clues**, which claims seem to be based, generally, upon a study done by Ken Goodman back in the mid-60s. He found, he said, that if you have children read in sentences, versus reading words in isolation, that the children will be able to read a much larger number of words in sentences, than they will words in isolation. There isn't any argument. I've tried to replicate Goodman's study, which his hard to replicate because the description of what he did is so loose and difficult to follow. But I tried my best. It is true that the children use the sentence context to help them read. We were mentioning a minute ago that if children can come close to the pronunciation of a word, they'll guess at the rest of it, and they'll use their intuition, they'll use inference to come up with the correct pronunciation of the word and be able to read that sentence as it actually is written. We do know that. But as for the wild, preposterous claims that are made about the excessive importance of context clues, I just don't think we can find supporting evidence.

Children's "shopping list" type of reading that they all go through is an example of counteractive evidence. There's a woman named Jewel in Texas, who has recently done a study indicating that excessive use of context actually slows down word recognition. A man named Blymiller studied this, and he found that in the first grade if you teach children to depend too much upon context clues, actually at the end of first grade they're not nearly as well off as if you shift them over to depend on phonics, too.

Myth No. 6

My sixth is that **lengths of words don't make any difference**. In other words, very long polysyllabic words are just as easy for children to read as are short, single-syllable words. You can't surround a child with all the words that have been written and sort of let him or her sort through and find a way through the thicket and come up with the skills of reading – and at the same time say that we should not restrict reading in any sense to short, monosyllabic words. Yet the evidence, it seems to me, is fairly clear: monosyllabic words are simply easier for children to learn to read.

If you do believe in subskills in reading and you do believe there is a hierarchy of reading, which I think practically everybody in the room does. (I think that that's a defensible position.). I think you have to agree that that's a myth; there is an importance about word length. You should be very careful when you first begin working with the kids about word length. One study that I discovered found that it takes about twice the number of phonics rules to be able to recognize two-syllable words as it does one-syllable words. It seems to me that in itself it a remarkable piece of evidence.

If you will check out the percentage of words that are in primary reading tests, you'll probably find there are very few long polysyllables words – probably not even more than 20%. Eighty percent of the words are single-syllable words. The test makers realize that, in the tests were primarily beginning reading skills are being tested, it is very important to find out if children can read the single-syllable words.

Another consideration is the application of what we call "phonics rules." For instance, if you take the so-called long and sort sounds, if you take a body of single-syllable words, those two rules will account for over 90% of the pronunciation. If you use either the short

or the long vowel sound in those words, you will come up with the correct pronunciation. As soon as you move into two-syllable words, three-syllable words, four-syllable words, more phonics rules are required.

Myth No. 7

My seventh myth is **modality-based instruction**. This point of view is that if you can find which sensory apparatus, or sensory input, the child prefers – either auditory or visual, and if you can construct your reading program to meet that preferred modality, you will then get much, much greater success in teaching reading than you would otherwise. That notion has been around for quite a while.

I ran across 14 recent and different reviews of the research on this hypothesis, and not one of them found that the idea held water. But that doesn't seem to mean much.

One team of people who did a survey of the research asked teachers about this, and of the teachers they asked, 99% believed it was true – that is if you constructed a system of instruction that matched the preferred learning modality of your pupils, you would teach them reading more effectively than otherwise would be the case. However, there just isn't any evidence that this is the case.

I think that part of this is the old business of “reading readiness” – that there's something out there called “reading readiness,” which doesn't really have to do with the ability to learn to read – it's something else. It is called “reading readiness,” and if you teach a child “reading readiness,” he'd be SO ready to learn to read. There just isn't anything to the notion, and yet it has floated around for so long. It has never been proven, no one has ever come up with a test that will demonstrate that it is true.

We have the other supposition that if you train children in visual and auditory skills before they begin reading, they will do much better. You know, if you have them doing little eye pursuits, drawing circles and finding geometric forms and finding which pictures match, etc. Again the evidence shows that most of that work is probably wasted effort.

You'd be so much better off saying, “What is it that children need to know to learn to read? Is it learning letters; is it learning the relationships between letters and sounds?” Whatever the thing is, go ahead and do it. If the child can't do it, obviously they're not ready. And so you say, “We'll hold off a little bit, and maybe play in the sandbox a little more, and give them a chance next week.” There is much evidence that this is a much better sort of readiness test than anything else.

Myth No 8.

Another myth is that **letter names are unimportant**. I'm going to have to be a bit cautious here, because a member of our audience has done some very significant research on question, and has found that teaching letter names doesn't really help children much in learning to read. (Editor's note: Be sure to see Dr. S. Jay Samuels' response, elsewhere in this issue.)

There are five different studies of this matter – about letter names not having any importance – there is no need to teach letter names because they don't help children learn to

read. In a volume published just this year, called *Reading Research Revisited*, a woman did a thoroughgoing critical analysis of these five studies.

From this analysis, she decided, “The negative evidence yielded by these five studies does not lay to rest the letter-name hypothesis.” She argues that each of the five studies has conspicuous and serious flaws. There’s where it gets touchy: when you’re talking about a person who tried to design a study that doesn’t have conspicuous and serious flaws and someone says that it does have serious flaws which could preclude one from drawing conclusions from the studies. As to the contribution that letter-name knowledge makes to reading acquisition, she complained that the design of the studies did not control several variables; the studies did not determine how well letter names must be known to be useful in recognizing words. ‘What was the relationship of letter names to characteristics of the words used to test the relationship of letter-name knowledge and reading ability? And what magnitude might make a difference in children’s learning to read?’

I thought especially telling was her criticism that this research isolated letter-name knowledge, and tested it as if it were a separate factor in reading acquisition. I don’t think we ever teach it that way. She argues that if letter names are taught simultaneously with phonics, it is probably that the integration of these variables would significantly affect reading acquisition. There is some evidence that if you teach both letter names and phonics at the same time you do get some results that otherwise would not be possible.

So I put this on my list, perhaps on the unsettled side. I am personally convinced that letter-name knowledge, if taught in a program on intensive phonics, will get better results than if you ignore them and deliberately, conspicuously try not to teach letter names. That’s where I think the evidence is.

Myth No. 9

My Myth No. 9 is **dictionary syllabication**, and I’m not sure how that gets into this. I suspect it’s because people want to have something to do with the analysis of words, but they don’t want to get into phonics – so they call it some sort of structural analysis. What they come up with are the way words are broken down according to the dictionary. (Of course, all linguists tell us that that has nothing much to do, really, with the way words are really broken down.) So they come up with little rules, like: *tumble* has to be broken as *tum-ble* and *motel* as *mo-tel*. Yet, we don’t have any evidence at all that you have to teach children such things. By far the better way, I think, is to let students discover that there are closed syllables in words – phonogram or whatever you want to call them – syllables that start with a vowel and end with a consonant sound, then find those clusters in polysyllabic words and create their own way of breaking words down into syllables.

It isn’t because I think it’s unimportant to teach syllables. In fact, I wrote an article not long ago in *Reading Teacher* called something like “Teaching Reading by Syllables.” I think there are some very good arguments for teaching words by syllables. We’re learning more and more that children do use those clusters with words as clues for the identification of words, but I don’t think dictionary syllabication has any effect in the teaching of reading.

Myth No. 10

The 10th myth on my list is that **reading tests really don't test reading**. If you want to argue against the studies that show the superiority of teaching phonics, all you have to do is to say that the tests we used in that circumstance didn't really teach reading. I remember at Sacramento, California, last year I was arguing on a panel with Kenneth Goodman and we finally came to that point. Kenneth said, "What you're talking about is not even reading." He said, "If you stand up there and tell this audience that the scores you get off those a test are an indication of how well children read, you're just not being really forthright with those people." He said, "That is not reading." If you believe that, of course, we can do away with all the past research. We can start afresh. Nobody has any arguments about anything. Anybody's attitude, or opinion, or speculation is just as good as anybody else's. I just can't believe that.

I do believe that there are some correlations. Of course, correlations aren't always that meaningful or that positive, but there are some high correlations between how well children do on reading test scores and how well they do on other sorts of academic work.

The other thing that bothers me is the substitute that they give us for the reading test. It's called an Oral Reading Miscue Analysis (ORMA). With the Oral Reading Miscue Analysis you have the child read a passage selection, then you have him or her just tell it back to you. On the basis of that, supposedly you can tell how well they are reading – that gives you a better indication of how well the child is reading than a reading test. Now here's the problem with that:

The directions for administering ORMA are vague, even at critical points. For an example, the administrator of this device, without guiding criterion, must decide if a child's response to a question is unclear, if he or she knows the plot of the story; or considering the total content of the story, whether the miscue does not interfere with the story meaning. No necessary criteria is given for determining whether or not the child comprehends unusual key words; no such help is given for ascertaining how many of the characters of the story the child must know, or how they must be identified in order to obtain total or partial score. The same is true for modifying statements, events, major concepts, generalizations, specific points or examples in the passages read aloud. Frankly, there is no way shown in ORMA for its administrators to resolve how much, or which detail, about the theme and plot of a passage a child must now to be given any certain comprehension rating. It's totally subjective. How you could, from one person to another, come up with comparable agreement as to how to manage this test, I don't know.

Myth No. 11

The last myth on my list is **subvocalization**, which, as some of you know, is the children's movement of their lips or vocal chords when they are reading. All first grade teachers have noticed that with children. They whisper aloud sometimes when they are reading. Supposedly reading silently, their lips will be moving. Some of you may read of some of the old strictures; children would be told to put something in their mouths, chewing gum or something, so they couldn't move their lips. What we have learned is that subvocalization is just as normal as mom's apple pie. Everybody does it. You do it; all

good readers do; any time you run into a little trouble, you start subvocalizing, maybe not by moving your lips, but if we put a little electrode on your vocal chords, your vocal chords will be moving every time you get in trouble.

The reason why the people who oppose the teaching of phonics were so excited about subvocalization was because they said this will slow down reading, it interferes with children's comprehension. It's a direct result of that old phantom, phonics teaching; if you didn't teach phonics, you wouldn't induce this disastrous behavior in children, and so forth and so on. Of course, all those things can be dispelled, I think, when we think that it's probably good that we do subvocalization. It's a probably very, very normal and natural sort of thing. We can't find anything truly wrong with it. People have tried, in experimental situations, to subdue it, and you can cut down on it. The result is you cut down on comprehension of what the person reads whenever you try to deliberately cut down on subvocalization.

WHY THE MYTHS LIVE SO LONG: 11 REASONS

Now I come to why these myths prevail. One of the reasons is tradition and I don't think I have to answer that beyond mentioning it's **traditional** for people to do things, and it's easier for you to do this year as you did last year. It's easier for publishers not to publish materials that look too much different from other materials that have sold well. Right? If you do, you're not very wise to spend the tens of millions of dollars to put out things, so tradition is a tremendous force.

Then we have what Yarrington in his book, *The Great American Reading Machine*, calls the **interlocking system** between the conflict of interests, interlocking system between publishers and reading professors and reading specialist, etc. The things that they say, the things that they do, the points of view that they hold about reading, are so conditioned by the financial interests and other sorts of interest they have, such as positions in reading organizations, it's almost impossible for them to come to a complete open and objective decision about the kinds of things we're talking about.

The third reason why myths of reading prevail is that reading professionals simply **won't accept criticism** from organizations like the *Reading Reform Foundation*. After all these years they are still hostile toward this organization, which is just a red flag to them. People in my department at San Diego State, and other people I've talked to—reading professors—can hardly believe that I would come. They see you as a threat. They see you really as a danger to them. You have some kind of ulterior motive. You're not really genuine in whatever you are doing. They really haven't accepted the books that have been written. They won't accept what the *Reading Reform Foundation* says. They won't accept what Flesch said in 1955, or anyone else. Some of those books, by the way, were very predictive. Of course you know Flesch's book, *Why Johnny Can't Read*. You know Terman and Walcutt, *Reading, Chaos and Cure*, written in 1958; McCracken's book, *The Right to Learn*, in 1959; and two books, *Reading and the Psychology of Perception* and *The Teaching of Reading in Spite of the Alphabet*, written in the '60s; Walcutt's book, *Tomorrow's Illiterates*, Mayor's book, *The Schools*, the Spaldings book, *The Writing Road to Reading* in 1962 (1957); the book, *Linguistics in Reading*, Trace's book, *Reading Without Dick and Jane*; Walton's book, *The Wasted Generation*; Matthew's book, *Teaching to Read*, in 1966; Mary Johnson's book, *Programmed Illiteracy in our Schools*; Blu-

menthal's *The New Illiterates*, written in 1974. What all of these books said was, "There are going to be some catastrophic effects of teaching 'look-say' materials." It all started, as far as I could go back, with Samuel Orton back in 1929, in an article he wrote in the *Journal of Educational Psychology*. All of these books have predicted what has come true, but they have been totally ignored by the reading professionals, who think all of these books very problematic. They simply won't pay any attention to these books.

The fourth reason for the reading myths is that I think that **a lot of reading professionals are ignorant about phonics**. Someone did a study reported in *Reading Research Revisited*, the book I mentioned earlier. He sent around a list to a select group of reading professors, asking them what they taught in their courses about phonics. His ulterior motive was to find out "What do they know about phonics?" The list of things they sent him as to what they taught about phonics really astounded him—full of technical errors, full of things that research had shown didn't work. He simply came to a conclusion that just because a professor has graduated with a doctoral degree and is teaching courses in a university, it doesn't necessarily mean that he knows very much about phonics. The reason for that, I think, is clear: phonics is thought of as a dated, old-fashioned, even obsolete kind of a subject which young professors don't really want to embrace.

The fifth reason for the endurance of the reading myths. There's a **great bias against phonics**. Let me give you a few examples of this. The Guren-Hughes study of reading was done two years before Chall's book came out. Guren-Hughes found that intensive teaching of phonics does a better job than does the "look-say" method. The very latest attack on that (and they've been attacked over the years since 1965) has come 20 years later in the book I've mentioned, *Reading Research Revisited*. The person says he can't believe in the Guren-Hughes study and at the same time, he can't find any reason why he believes that way. He can't quote any surveys of research that have disagreed with the Guren-Hughes work. Now, you can nit-pick all night long: is this the best collection of studies? Did these studies fit the criteria that the people said they were surveying? Did they analyze the studies accurately? And on, and on, and on. However, if you find one review after another, after another, after another, that all come to the same general conclusion, I think that says something. I think people who fight that trend must be fighting it because they have a **built-in bias against phonics**. They just cannot bring themselves to believe in phonics. Younger professors, I think, are intimidated into so believing, in a way. If you look at the major journals of the *National Council of Teachers of English* (NCTE)—*Language Arts* and the *International Reading Association* (IRA)—*Reading Teacher*, you will find very few papers on phonics. Recently, I looked through the last five years of *Language Arts*. I found 34 articles during that five-year period that dealt in some way with the intensive teaching of phonics. Two of the articles favored it, the remainder denounced or were opposed to it. I went through a five-year period of *Reading Teacher* and found 28 articles that were complimentary to the so-called psycho-linguistic anti-phonics approach, but I couldn't find a single article in that five-year period that took a negative view of the so-called anti-phonics approach. There has to be some bias there. This bias might—and this is my next point—this bias might result from the great fear professors of reading have that they're going to be associated with right-wing, super-conservative elements in our society if they came out for phonics. It is true that some people who have come out very strongly for phonics also have come out very strongly for traditional morality, harsh punishment for crime, extensive military preparedness, open

displays of patriotism, vigorous anti-communism, strict meritocracy in the work place and in the school, the work ethic, states' rights, and laissez-faire economics. It is true, I'm sure, that some people, who support phonics, so believe. But I dare say there are phonics supporters who don't believe in those sorts of things, because I don't believe in a lot of those things. I don't understand the necessary connection, but the connection is there—enough to the extent that one reading professor tells how it operates on her campus. This is what she says in an educational publication: “Even though we might agree with a part of what phonics advocates say, the association of phonics instruction and conservatism suppresses our saying so. In some circles, mentioning that you think a code-breaking approach to beginning reading might be appropriate for some children is tantamount to supporting the John Birch Society.”

The seventh reason reading myths endure, I think, is **the stand of the IRA and NCTE in not accepting papers that deal with phonics**. This came home to another writer and me. We had just got a list of reasons for the rejection. The very same month I picked up the *Reading Teacher* and here it was: a little study that had gone on for two weeks, didn't use a standardized test, used only a handful of kids, and had a lot of other weaknesses which we didn't have in our study. Ours was a yearlong study; we worked with a program, and used standardized tests.

I know the reason the other study was published was because in the conclusion the author says he sees phonics as a great weakness that didn't work with this group.

It's pretty hard for me to interpret that other than as some sort of insidious (I use that word cautiously, but carefully and deliberately) — some sort of insidious system that works against a free, open, total and frank presentation of all ideas about reading. That's all anyone should ask of these organizations—they shouldn't be asked to favor any one thing.

Another reason: We have an “**anything goes**” **approach**. Research is simply ignored. One pair of researchers said they identified 3,000 reading studies during the years 1933 to 1968. Yet, they couldn't find in any of the basal readers during that 30-year period any evidence at all that any of the findings of these studies had any influence. So there's no application of research, and there certainly must be.

And then we come to the **refusal**, simply, of some reading experts **to admit that there is a problem**. They say the evidence reported by the *National Commission on Excellence in Education* simply isn't true. “It's a misinterpretation of the facts. We don't have a reading problem. We're getting better rather than worse. There aren't that many illiterates. It's just all some kind of selective hoax.”

My eleventh, and last, explanation for the endurance of the reading myths rests in the nature of the **financial structure of the public school system**. The public school has become an **educational monopoly**, since it alone receives all the tax monies that are directly allotted for our children's education. It is normal under monopoly not to have competition. There is little incentive under monopoly to reject traditional yet unworthy ways of operating and to find more productive methods; no one says, “Is this the best method I am using or is this a myth of reading instruction which I should try to change?”

Now I come to the very toughest part: **What can we do** to dispel the myths of reading instruction?

I have only three solutions, and I don't even know if they are very good solutions. First, I think we need a national institute or commission on literacy, a federal organiza-

tion which would be made up of intelligent and concerned lay people with a critical, but disinterested, view of the present problems of teaching children to read. After consultation with all parties interested in this issue, except those who profit from the sale of reading materials to the schools, this commission would issue guidelines for a preferred procedure for teaching reading. The mass of documented evidence that favors phonics certainly would not be dismissed by a body of concerned citizens who were willing to take a disinterested view of this research.

Secondly, I think that a merit pay plan would help in dispelling the myths of reading instruction. I think that if teachers were asked to produce and got merit pay for producing, under totally controlled and fair circumstances that teachers would look around and say, "Am I using the system that works best, or am I just being taken advantage of?" Teachers vying for salary increases would have incentive to seek out and use the type of reading instruction that produces the highest test scores.

Third, the institution of the voucher plan for school financing would be another way to help eliminate the myths of reading instruction. In the voucher system all parents of children of school age would be provided monetary warrants which they in turn would cash for their children's education at schools of their choice. Under the voucher system, public schools would have to convince parents of the quality of the education that they offer, rather than to simply compel parents to send their children to them. This form of competition would break the present monopoly of education that the public schools hold and force it to compete with the non-public school system for students. This would give the public schools much more incentive than they presently have to improve their reading program. This improvement would undoubtedly involve far more intensive teaching of phonics than is now the case. As a result, the dominance of the myths of reading instruction would be weakened, if not destroyed.

Comments and Questions:

Charles Richardson: One fact that spikes the argument about the English language being insufficiently phonetic to make it worthwhile is I know personally of at least three computer programs that do a very good job of reading straight English and pronouncing it acceptably well to be understood. The best known I believe is the Curswell reading machine, developed in Cambridge. There are many libraries that I have been into where a blind person can take a book, lay it on top of the machine, learn how to turn the knobs, and it'll read the book to him.

Groff: Artificial language is coming. Now artificial language may not sound precisely as you and I talk, but it's understandable. It's a technology that works to advantage, because it's so patient, it can work over and over and over with people—it never disrupts them, it never argues with them, it always gives them the extra help they need.

Charles Richardson: I spoke to the man who programmed them, and he said the phonics programming was easy. The difficult job was getting it to recognize all of its different character parts.

Sheila Morrison: I just wanted to tell you that there is one thing that you had missed. Up in Canada we have a new method of teaching reading, which is called, "The Chime In." I'm sure this is new to all of you, but I thought you'd rather enjoy it, and the young lady has managed to publish it with the full blessing of her local board of education. It works like this: She reads a line or two, and when the children see a word they recognize

they all “chime in.” As far as I could figure out, the only one they all chimed in on was *the*.

Groff: That sounds a little like reading by ‘immersion’ that I was talking about earlier when you just read along and pretty soon kids pick up on words. The ball starts rolling and then it’s glory land. Nobody has to do anything, particularly the teacher. It works like a charm.

Groff: I’d like to challenge the group. I’ve given you a lot of reasons why these myths prevail and are perpetuated. Is there any way to do away with this? Flesch and others like him say that we should go en masse to the school district and protest, or we should teach our kids at home, or transfer our kids into another, better school. You can’t do that. You can’t transfer kids around schools – they all live in districts. Galvanizing people to go barging into the school board – apparently these things just aren’t very effective. I’m not saying they don’t have an effect, but I wonder if they’re going to have the effect of ever dispelling some of the myths about reading instruction.

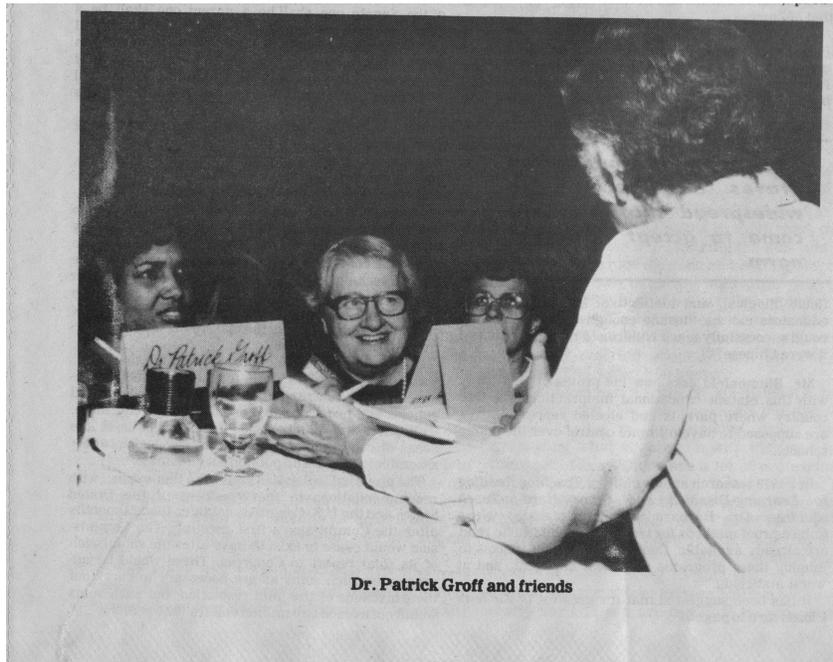
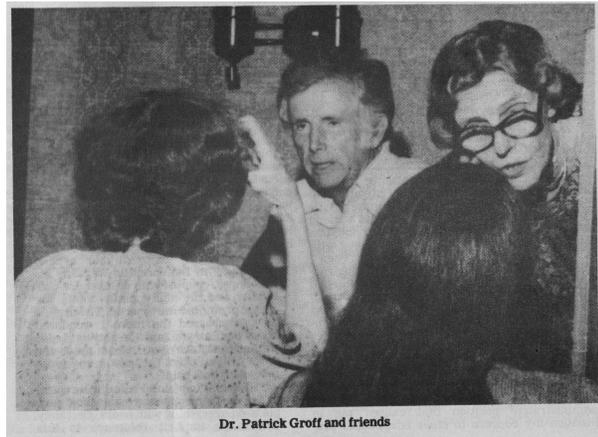
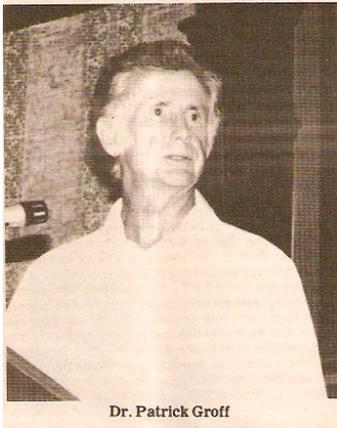
Oma Riggs: It’s happening all over the country, you know that. Our so-called home schools, for instance. The parents are taking their children out of the public schools by the hundreds, and thousands. I taught a group of parents in Salt Lake City a year ago this Fourth of July, and they had a membership of 500 parents who were keeping their children out of public schools. They teach them at home, and out there, apparently the judges tend to say, “Well, if your child is doing as well as, or better than his peers who go to the public schools, then, of course you may teach him at home.” Now this 500 membership is just around the Salt Lake City area.

Groff: I don’t lack any appreciation for that, but I think it’s such a drop in the bucket, *Oma*.

Oma: I agree it’s only a drop in the bucket, but after all, the oceans made up of drops.

Groff: I don’t want to put you down or anything, but I think that the changes that are going to have to be made are much more structural. The kind of structural changes I’m talking about where parents could take their children to schools of their own choice, where we had a national institute or commission on literacy to propagate throughout the whole nation that there is a preferred way of teaching, and it’s defensible to do it that way, there would be almost a revolution, I think. Or if we had some way of making teachers accountable, under strictly controlled situations, for producing and they would have to find the most productive way of doing things. These are structural changes, that would affect all layers of education, I’m saying that something such as you mentioned helps, but we’re going to have to have far more structural, basic structural changes to ever shake this.

Some Candid Cameras of Dr. Groff from the 1987 RRF Conference Report



Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

January 4, 2009

Although first published in the 1983 *The Reading Reform Foundations Conference Report* (Vol. 11, No. 1 – Sept.-Oct., 1983 of the RRF, July 22-24, Indianapolis, IN.), Dr. Groff's paper is still as relevant as it was back then. I personally heard every one of the myths that Dr. Groff mentioned repeated on the lips of teachers, professors, and presenters during my 21 years in public education. I retired in 2006. I doubt if much has changed: Thus the continuing relevance of this important paper.

The *National Right to Read Foundation* website, www.nrrf.org, has articles by Dr. Groff and phonics programs that he recommends. My www.blendphonics.org is rich with phonics material.

I have also published other papers by Dr. Groff on my web site, www.donpotter.net There you will find, not only theoretical and research articles, but actual phonics methods that have stood the test of time such as Florence Akin's 1913 *Word Mastery*, Charles Walcutt's *Through the Phonics Barrier*, Hazel Loring's 1980 *Reading Made Easy with Blend Phonics*, and the justly famous 1936 Hegge-Kirk-Kirk *Remedial Reading Drills*. All these programs available for free download. Perhaps the finest phonics reading program ever developed, Webster's 1824 *American Spelling Book* and 1908 *Elementary Spelling Book* are also available for free on my web site.

Professor Groff makes the good point that length of words made a difference, with longer words being harder, but see Webster's 1824 *American Spelling Book* for a unique system of classifying polysyllables by levels of difficulty. Few people are aware of the existence of "easy polysyllables." This is a very important point. I have found that the best way to teach polysyllables is with Webster's Syllabary and Webster's lists of polysyllables classified linguistically by length and accent placement. See my *Blend Phonics Polysyllables* for a practical and successful method for teaching polysyllables.

I wish to register my agreement with Groff's recommendation to teach letter-names along with intensive phonics to beginning students. I realize this is a hotly debated issue. Three giants in the field of reading instruction recommend teaching letter names to beginning readers: Samuel Blumenfeld, Leonard Bloomfield, and Hazel Loring. It was my experience with these programs that lead me to develop my *Blend Phonics Alphabet Flashcards*. When I teach Hazel Loring's 1980, *Reading Made Easy for Blend Phonics for First Grade*, I follow her directions for teaching the letter names **with** the sounds. Once the students have decoded a word from the chalkboard, I always have them spell orally with letter names. This has proven to lead to better results in both reading and spelling. Sam Blumenfeld has some very excellent "Pre-Reading Alphabet Drills" in his *Alpha-Phonics* primer. Groff's paper does not address handwriting, but my experience is that cursive is superior to manuscript for teaching reading and writing.

The success of the homeschool movement since 1983 is a monument to the good judgment of millions of America parents.

You may still order Dr. Groff's larger work on *Myths of Teaching Reading* from a link on my web site to www.amazon.com.

Last revised 4/16/16