The Origins of the Present-day Chasm between Adult Literacy Needs and School Literacy Instruction

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Through processes that originated in the eighteenth century — but were greatly accelerated by Brahmin academics at the end of the nineteenth — a separation has developed between literacy instruction in the schools and the literacy needs of the competent citizen. Formal reading instruction today is primarily oriented toward understanding and appreciation of fine literature. Non-fiction materials are treated as unpleasant and boorish intruders into the otherwise serene, romantic kingdom of plot, character, and author's viewpoint. A single impotent strategem centering on rapid skimming with rereading is usually suggested for all non-fiction, be it math story problem, cooking recipe, or biological exposition. The result of this disparity, as revealed by the more valid components of various national literacy surveys, is the ever apparent chasm between competency needs and literacy instruction, a chasm that can be crossed only through a reorientation of literacy training toward the true needs of society.

Sigmund Freud at the age of 81, in commenting on psychoanalysis, touched on one of the great truths about education. Freud wrote in a small text called *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (1937) the following: "It almost looks as if analysis were the third of those 'impossible' professions in which one can be sure before-hand of achieving unsatisfying results. The other two, which have been known much longer, are education and government."[1] Throughout the history of education in the United States the public has more often than not been dissatisfied with what the schools were doing. No matter how the schools behaved, the public (or some highly vocal subset thereof) wanted something different. Literacy instruction, as the central focus of primary education, has been the most visible target of the school's critics. The level of literacy attainment in the general population has been a public concern since the earliest settlement of North America, yet it is an issue that differs from many other problems faced by educators today in that it is, to a large degree, solvable. And it is solvable by means other than revolution, dismantling of the current schooling system, or other cataclysmic events.

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What I will argue here is, first, that there exists a large chasm between adult literacy needs — as assayed by the literacy demands of work, citizenship, and recreation — and the literacy instruction of the schools. In particular, I will argue that while the literacy needs of the adult center primarily on obtaining information from non-fictional texts, literacy instruction in the schools concentrates almost exclusively on fictional texts and literary appreciation. Second, I will demonstrate that the origins of this chasm can be found in the socialization of schooling which has proceeded for over 300 years in America, and that this socialization has often worked against achieving higher reading ability. Finally, I will present a plan for making literacy instruction more congruent with the literacy needs of society. This argument for the prosecution is divided into four sections, each starting with the letter C. The first will deal with the *chasm,* the second with *comprehension,* the third with *content* (meaning content of readers), and the last with *conclusions*.

Chasm

First, what is a chasm? The term was first used in print in English around 1619 in the phrase: "that gaping casma and insatiable gulf of the souls appetite."[2] Thomas Huxley, the biologist, wrote in 1878: "the Colorado River flows at the bottom of a profound chasm." And Samuel Coleridge in "Kubla Khan" said "But oh! that deep romantic chasm which slanted / Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover." None of these usages, however, comes as close to how I intend the term here as what Walpole wrote in the eighteenth century: "The fables with which our own writers have replenished the chasms in our history." What I mean by a chasm in this context is simply a big, yawning hollow that exists between the form of literacy that is promulgated by the schools under the curricular title of reading instruction, and what adults need to survive as good citizens, as productive contributors to the national good, as realizers of their own potentials.

What are these skills, abilities, or competencies that adults need? If we examine what a school child must do, we see that by sixth grade more than 75% of what the child must read within the school is not the fiction that is the main substance of school based literacy programs, but rather non-narrative and nonfictional materials. By the middle grades the child must be able to gain meaning from a science text, a social studies text, a math text, and a variety of other informational materials that begin to approximate the very materials that the average adult must cope with in what we call adult life. By senior high school perhaps as much as 90% of the student's

required reading, including those out-of-school materials necessary for success at the secondary level, are non-fiction.

But we can go further and ask, What do adults read? Part of the answer to this comes from a survey, done in the middle 1960s by the Michigan Urban Center.[3] About 2000 adults were asked to keep a diary of what they did for an entire day. The results showed that approximately five minutes per day were spent reading books, and of these books perhaps less than 15% were fiction. Similar results, although with different subject populations, have been found in studies done at Educational Testing Service and elsewhere (Sharon, 1972; Heath, 1980). Although book sales continue to increase, the materials that are showing the highest acceleration are trade magazines and textbooks; that is, non-fiction materials that deal with either how to do something better (which is a current mania of American adulthood) or with job-related topics.

Why, though, a concern for the types of texts that adults read, or that schools use in reading instruction? The critical evidence for the chasm argument is not simply the weighting of genres, but rather the analysis of competency skills required for obtaining meaning from different types of materials. What adults read is heavily laden with graphs and charts, with compound and complex sentences, with quantifiers and qualifiers, and with logical conditionals such as *if—then, while, until,* and *whenever.* The competencies required to obtain information from IRS forms, from automobile warranties, from operating guides for microwave ovens, and from the telephone book frontmatter are of a different ilk from the literary skills which dominate present-day reading instruction. Following the story line in the *Three Little Pigs* or understanding Hester Prynne's conflict between social tradition and personal freedom are representative of the comprehension skills stressed in the schools today. That these skills are desirable outcomes of schooling is not argued; however, these skills seldom lead to the abilities required for understanding most non-fiction materials.

Finding the main idea of a short story has marginal application to understanding science descriptions where no single main idea exists; building character descriptions has little application to comprehending math story problems where the characters, if they exist, are usually irrelevant to the problem solutions; and predicting outcomes of fictional tales has no application to reading charts and graphs. Yet finding the main idea of a story, building character descriptions, and predicting story outcomes are the most important components of literacy instruction today. Although there is an occasional acknowledgment within the basal programs of the

existence of non-fictional texts, these sops toward content-area reading are generally brief, bland, and without serious emphasis.

An examination of the two leading basal reading programs used in the schools today reveals that more than 90% of their reading selections, based on page counts, are fiction. The remainder, which consists of highly sanitized and abbreviated excerpts, is treated as a boorish intrusion into the otherwise serene and romantic kingdom of plot, character, and author's viewpoint. What little is offered for comprehending these encroachments on fine writing is generally assigned rather than taught. No group activities here, no round-robin reading, no "creative extensions." Just take the bitter pill quickly and get on with the sunnier side of life.

It is important to note at this point that the competencies not being taught adequately in the literacy programs are complex skills that are seldom obtained easily by school children outside of school. Warranties (even the simplified ones), science articles, and microwave oven instructions require an ability to make inferences, untangle conditional statements, and restructure densely packed information, the very skills which the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress survey showed students were doing more and more poorly.[4] These are also the skills that the Louis Harris and Associates survey showed millions of adults were lacking.[5]

The consequences of this chasm between school instruction and adult literacy needs can be seen in examples outside of literacy surveys. One such outcome is Catepillar Fundamental English, a reduced form of English that Caterpillar Tractor Company now uses to write its operating and repair manuals.[6] This modern day equivalent to Ogden and Richards *Basic English* utilizes a lexicon of approximately 800 words, with an accompanying dictionary that gives a single meaning to each word, and a writer's guide that defines usable sentence types and other stylistic simplications. Although the original motivation for this *patois* was derived largely from the limited command of English among employees and customers in Catepillar's foreign subsidiaries, its continual use in this country and the licensing of about 30 other U. S. firms to adapt the system to their own needs is based in part on the less than adequate ability among domestic workers to read technical materials.[7]

Similarly, the U.S. military has started to abandon its program for providing general literacy ability to recruits who enlist with inadequate reading skills. Instead, the military is moving toward occupational literacy, wherein one learns only the literacy skills required for an assigned military occupational specialty.[8]

These facts contrast rather starkly with the sophistry of a small group of "literacy loyalist" who roam the country extolling the virtues of modern schooling and exclaiming to wedding guests, congressmen, and housewives how well the schools are doing in teaching reading. The evidence they invoke is usually some small gain in reading ability over the last 40 years or so for a particular grade in one county or another, usually in the Midwest. The issue, unfortunately, is not where we are today compared to forty years ago or compared to the Minutemen or to the heralds in Charlemagne's court, but rather, where we are today in relation to today's needs. The needs today for literacy are very different from the needs of 1940, or of 1776 or of 800. And the evidence we have indicates a less than satisfactory situation.

In summary, the chasm story is quite simple. Adults need a certain set of literacy skills for success in everyday life: for work, for citizenship, and for recreation. The schools are teaching something else, and this something else isn't leading to what adults need. Reading tests that tap only the elementary level reading skills give the misleading impression that literacy programs are succeeding, but assessments of high school level students and of adults indicate otherwise, as do the literacy-related policies of the industrial employers and of the military. In even simpler terms, the schools are not stressing reading, but literary appreciation. This is why the chasm exists. What remains to be explained is how this state of incongruence came to be and what can be done about it.

Comprehension

If a chasm exists, where did it come from? One hypothesis is that it derives from sloth, avarice, greed, and ignorance on the part of teachers, administrators, publishers, and professors of education. In this there is probably an element of truth, but not enough to account for the enormous yawning hollow that now exists between adult abilities and school instruction. Another hypothesis and one that fits more into the current trends of educational history attributes this problem to a conspiracy by the rich to deny opportunities for advancement to the working class, the poor, and the minorities. With sufficient struggling, one could rally some evidence for this hypothesis also, but in general the rich as a group have throughout the history of American education been singularly unsuccessful at consistently promoting anything outside of hemophilia.

The third hypothesis and the one I will marshal support for here is that throughout the history of education in this country the public school has been a particularly weak and vulnerable institution, continually dominated

by the more general attitudes and beliefs of society, rather than being in charge of its own affairs. Literacy instruction in particular, because it is the dominant concern of the primary school, has been heavily influenced by this socialization of schooling, and in ways that have led to the current situation. In other words, literacy instruction has suffered from being other directed rather than inner directed. The need of society to transmit its beliefs, its myths, and its rituals to the young has in each generation dominated the content and methodology of literacy instruction. In the past 100 years this condition has blocked the ability of schools to focus on teaching text comprehension, primarily because the social need to stress cultural refinement has led to an emphasis on "good" literature in literacy programs, almost to the total exclusion of non-fictional texts. To understand this, however, one must follow the various stages that comprehension instruction has progressed through, from the early colonial period, through the nineteenth century awakening, the rise of industrial society, the progressive era, and into modern times where true comprehension instruction might have emerged, but was stultified by behavioral psychology.

When public schooling began in this country in the 1640s, the dominant view of the child was derived strictly from theology. The child was considered to be sin prone, hostile to learning, and incapable of understanding. Children were treated as miniature but deficient adults, to be dressed as adults and given toys that made obvious to them what the adult world looked like.[9] From this world view or *kinderanschauung,* rote learning with stiff doses of discipline were natural derivatives, with almost no emphasis on meaning. Reading was not taught for general literacy, but for personal salvation. Each Calvinist was to read and interpret the Bible by himself.

When Noah Webster published his first speller in 1783 (which was roughly 31 years after Benjamin Franklin almost killed himself with his kite experiment and just two years after Mozart's death, the theological view of the child was still popular. But by the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, as America evolved into a more secular state and as the European enlightenment began to infiltrate across the Atlantic, a philosophically based kinderanschauung began to dominate education. Now the child was seen no longer in terms of original sin, but as a developing individual with natural child-interests and limited but developing learning capacity. Rousseau, as operationalized by Pestalozzi, formed the basis for this educational reform, which Horace Mann, Henry Barnard, and others fostered in the middle 1800s. Nevertheless, the conditions of schooling and the continued emphasis on oral reading still militated against a strong concern for teaching reading comprehension.

When independence was declared in this country, approximately 2% of the population lived in urban areas. By 1800 this figure had risen to 3.3% and by 1860 to only 16%. Therefore, schooling for most children in the eighteenth and the larger part of the nineteenth century meant the oneroom, rural schoolhouse, an institution that was seldom recalled romantically or charitably. Clifton Johnson, who attended a rural New England school in the late 1860s, claimed: "Notable men have come from 'the little red schoolhouses,' but this was because of their own native energy and thrifty acquisitiveness, and was not due to any superlative virtues of the schools themselves."[10]

On the quality of instruction in the rural schoolhouse, the Reverend Warren Burton wrote in 1833: "Few of the better methods of teaching . . . had then found their way out of, or into, the brain of the pedagogical profession."[11]

Abraham Lincoln, who attended rural schools on the frontiers of Kentucky and Indiana in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, was even less charitable than Burton in describing his school masters: "No qualification was ever required beyond readin', writin', and cypherin' to the Rule of Three: If a straggler supposed to understand Latin happened to sojourn in the neighborhood, he was looked upon as a wizard."[12]

In summing up the rural school of the late 1820s, Maxine Green writes: "The typical district 'school' was no better than a charity school. Delapidated in appearance, inept and shiftless in the service it rendered, it remained open for about two months each year."[13]

The autobiographies of people like John Muir and Abraham Lincoln provide further testimony not only on the conditions of the rural schoolhouse, but also on the limited amount of time that children spent in school. (Yet somehow both Muir and Lincoln, and many of their contemporaries, became competent adults, able to read and comprehend both non-fiction and fiction.)

But the factor that most inhibited attention to comprehension until the early part of this century was an emphasis on oral reading. From the origins of literacy through classical antiquity and into the middle ages and the Renaissance, silent reading was apparently unusual.[14] There is, for example, the well known story of St. Augustine being startled by the sight of St. Ambrose reading without moving his lips. Roman laws from the second and third centuries required that one maintain a particular distance from the nearest hearer while reading state documents. And the Benedictine reforms of the ninth and tenth centuries attended to the problem of exces-

sive noise which resulted from 'private' reading. Until perhaps the time of Chaucer, silent reading was not common even for adults. For schooling, however, oral reading continued to be stressed until the beginning of the twentieth century. James Wickersham, a lecturer and principal of the Pennsylvania State Normal School and later superintendent of the Pennsylvania common schools, wrote at the end of the Civil War: "Reading, as a branch of instruction, is the art of giving proper oral expression to written or printed composition . . . . Skill in Reading may be desired for the purpose of understanding written or printed language, and without any intention of reading for the benefit of others, but it is evident that a teacher can only judge of such skill by an oral exhibition of it."[15]

The opening statement in *McGuffey's Fifth Eclectic Reader* leaves no doubt about the purpose of reading in the nineteenth century. "The great object to be accomplished in reading as a rhetorical exercise is to convey to the hearer, fully and clearly, the ideas and feelings of the writer."[16]

Stress on oral reading resulted from several factors. First, the literacy rate in the country outside of the Northeast was low. Therefore, training for reading aloud to illiterate family members and friends was a necessity. Then, the low level of daily school attendance and the short period in which people stayed in school probably provided insufficient exposure to print to build up fluent silent reading ability. (This changed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, in the progressive era in American education, when enforcement of compulsory attendance laws was started in ernest. Thus, while the average child in 1870 spent less than 45 days in school, by 1918 the average child was spending much more than twice that amount of time.)

With the rise of major metropolitan centers and increased industrialization and bureaucracy, schooling became more organized and more complex, and school districts with large administrative staffs came into being. School buildings grew larger, classes were age-graded, and the school staff divided into teachers, principals, and eventually subject-matter specialists. Having students for more days per year and more years on the average than ever before created the opportunity for teaching reading skills beyond oral enunciation. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century when the need for teaching silent reading was becoming obvious to the more enlightened educators, no generally accepted procedures existed for evaluating silent reading. But the solution to this problem was already underway.

Beginning in Wundt's laboratory in Leipzig in the late 1870s, experimental psychologists began empirical investigations of human physical and mental abilities. Spurred by the Darwinian emphasis on variability of human

traits, Cattell, Galton, and others turned these procedures to the development of tests for various physical and mental abilities. This pursuit merged with the early I. Q. work of Binet and Henri to produce in the United States standardized tests for achievement in school subjects. The first published school test was Thorndike's handwriting scale (1910), but math and oral reading tests followed within a few years. By 1915 standardized silent reading tests were available and were quickly employed at the school and district level.

All the props were in place now for the appearance of strong comprehension instruction. Unfortunately, at this same time the dominant psychology in America shifted to behaviorism and the emerging cognitive base for comprehension instruction failed to receive significant attention again until the 1950s. Where previously psychologists were concerned about the stages through which information passed in perception and recognition, and the ways in which ideas were retained in memory after reading or listening, the new psychology was interested only in stimulus and response. "Any problem of education," Thorndike wrote in 1914, "may be put in the forms: — 'Given a certain desired change in a man, what situation shall we create to produce it, either directly or by the response which it provokes from him?' "[17] The central nervous system, the behaviorist were willing to admit, existed but had no practical relevance whatsoever for psychology. What went on within the head could not be observed, therefore one should learn to manipulate the environment, and thereby induce through the laws of association and contiguity the various behaviors that were desired.

What behavioral psychology produced was a lack of concern among psychologists and therefore among school people for the mental processes which characterized comprehension. For example, Woodworth's text on experimental psychology, which was the backbone of experimental psychology courses in this country from its first edition in 1938 until fairly recently, contains a long and well developed chapter on research on reading.[18] A large number of topics are covered in that chapter, ranging from the history of writing to word recognition, but never once is the word "comprehension" mentioned nor is a single study on comprehension reviewed. In the revision of the text in 1954, the reading material is expanded, but distributed across chapters.[19] Again, comprehension is not mentioned. The *Seventeenth Yearbook of the National Elementary Principal,* issued in 1938, contains a lengthy section on newer practices in reading in the elementary school — with chapters on readiness, beginning instruction, cultivating appreciation and good taste in reading, and other topics — but not a single discussion of

comprehension. And in Anderson and Dearborn's 1952 text on the psychology and pedagogy of reading, there are chapters on readiness, on beginning reading, on word perception, and on teaching methods, but no chapter on comprehension.[20] The word "comprehension" is mentioned here and there, but mainly in reference to comprehension tests. This situation in the middle 1930s was summarized succinctly in a text on the psychology of elementary school subjects: "As a psychological process little is known about comprehension."[21]

It is remarkable that at a time when psychology was accepted fully within the school, and when psychologists and educators agreed that understanding was the most important goal of teaching reading, hardly a word is ever mentioned about comprehension. This situation does not begin to change until the revival of cognitive psychology in the 1950s, but only now in the 1980s do we see the beginnings of a psychological base for teaching comprehension, particularly in studies on memory structure and learning strategies.

Linguistics has been no more help than psychology up to the present time in building a scientific base for teaching comprehension. The origins of modern linguistics in this country, through Sapir and Bloomfield, had within it almost no concern for meaning. Meaning was viewed as a part of language, but something to be left until most of the other problems were resolved. Even the early transformational grammars left meaning as an adjunct, to be added somewhere after the base structure was generated. But this situation also has changed. Linguists are now interested in the analysis of texts, among other topics in semantics, semiotics, and pragmatics.

In summary, the teaching of comprehension was not a concern in the early days of reading instruction because the primary emphasis in the classroom was on oral reading, children spent too little time in school to become proficient silent readers, and the prevailing beliefs in the early years of American education about children's abilities were such that understanding was not emphasized in instruction. With the educational enlightenment of the nineteenth century, education became more meaning centered, but oral reading still dominated. At the beginning of the twentieth century emphasis in reading instruction began to turn to comprehension, but the advent of behaviorism retarded the psychological study of comprehension processes until the 1950s.

Content

In general, the content of school readers over the last 300 years has been viewed in each generation as the essence of elementary education. Every culture attempts to perpetuate itself by teaching to its children its myths, its rituals, and its social fantasies. In this way the children are to faithfully join the culture and continue it for another generation. In Biblical times parents were commanded to learn the customs and "to teach them diligently unto thy children." In Colonial America, when personal salvation was a major concern, the content of the readers was strictly religious: the Bible and the catechism. After independence, the content of the readers began to reflect a concern for patriotism and for morality. As we moved into industrialization in the middle of the nineteenth century, the content of the readers reflected a desire to produce the compliant worker who would march off at sun-up to the factory, labor through the day until the sun went down, and accept whatever reward the captains of industry might bestow upon him.

The content of readers at this time also reflected the conflicts within Protestant America between morality and materialism. By the end of the 1800s the rich were portrayed as having exceptional character, giving rewards to others for their efforts. Virtue no longer had much meaning by itself; it was performance that was rewarded in society. Parallel to the development of the industrial paragon, battles raged over the inclusion of nursery rhymes and fiction in readers. At the beginning of the nineteenth century various Sunday School movements opposed the inclusion of fiction in readers because they felt that God had revealed his plan in only one way and to allow children to divert their attention from the reality of the life they were to face was somehow to move them closer to the clutches of the great Satan. Nevertheless, an indigenous literature arose in this country by the middle of the nineteenth century and began to appear almost immediately in children's readers, although carefully selected to reflect those values that society felt it stood for.

Soon literature began to dominate the school readers, replacing the homilies, nature essays, and Bible excerpts that characterized the *McGuffey Readers* and other reading materials of the previous generation. At the end of the nineteenth century Charles Elliott, Nicholas Butler Murray, William T. Harris, and others who were active in the National Education Association and the Committee of Fifteen pressed the schools to teach reading from good literature. Elliott himself called the content of readers at that time "ineffable trash."[22] What grew out of this period has remained until now as the dominant emphasis in the content of readers.

In summary, the content of school readers has reflected throughout the history of this country the images and aspirations of the social majority. From the religious themes of the New England Calvinists, to the morality and patriotism of the post revolutionary period, to the business ethic of the last century, and the cultural refinement of this century, children have been shown in their school readers what their elders want them to believe are the noblest aspirations of the American citizen. The modern view, perhaps by neglect, is that school readers should demonstrate good literary tastes; hence, little non-fiction in the reading programs.[23]

Conclusions

We have arrived at our present chasm between literacy instruction and literacy needs by way of two seemingly unrelated paths. One path stretches from a time when we didn't need to teach comprehension to the present time when we desperately need to teach it. The other path stretches from Bible and catechism selections to modern eclectic fiction. Until recently no psychological base existed for building a rational comprehension instruction. However, even in the 1920s practical techniques were available for teaching comprehension of content area materials. For example, a committee appointed by the National Society for the Study of Education described in 1925 pedagogical approaches for teaching elementary and secondary students how to read math story problems, social studies texts, and a variety of other non-fictional materials.[24] A clear distinction was drawn between recreational reading (i.e., fiction) and what the authors called work-type reading. Metacognition played a major role in the committee's recommendations as did the reduction of complex tasks to sequences of simpler subtasks.

The skills required for reading graphs and charts, for deriving time lines, and for diagramming math story problems (among others) are as complex and as sophisticated as those required for deciding on main idea and characterization, yet somehow the former set, because they apply primarily to utilitarian materials, have been relegated to a low status in the school curriculum while the latter, since they involve the student in "high" literature, have been elevated far beyond their importance. Tools and techniques are available for teaching the study of non-fictional texts. What is lacking is a willingness on the part of the schools to provide an honored place for non-fiction in the literacy program.

There is no rational defense for reading programs that avoid math story problems, science texts, social studies texts, and the full range of other materials that reflect the reading tasks faced by school students and adults. There is no longer an excuse for schools to perseverate on the niceties of narrative plot, characterization, and author's point of view. Literature should definitely remain in the curriculum, but it should have its place like science, math, social studies, and the other required subjects. Schools must and can teach those literacy skills that adults desperately need to survive in society.

Clarence Darrow, in his summary for the jury in the Leopold and Loeb case, cited the following verse from Omar Khayyam, which seems appropriate for ending here.

> The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
> Moves on: nor all your Pity nor Wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
> Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.

The past is behind us. As a famous comedian once said, "The future lies ahead." The challenge now is to select the best methods for teaching nonfiction, non-narrative comprehension, and to teach these methods diligently unto our teachers.

1. *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud,* XXIII. Translated from the German under the general editorship of James Stachey. London: Hogarth Press, 1974.

2. The citations that follow are quoted from the *Oxford English dictionary,* s.v. *chasm,* except for Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," which is quoted from Charles W. Eliot (Ed.), *The Harvard classics,* XLI. New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910, p. 702.

3. John Robinson. *How Americans use time*. New York: Praeger Press, 1977.

4. National Assessment of Educational Progress. *Three national assessments of reading: Changes in performance, 1970-1980*. Report No. 11-R-1. Education Commission of the States, Denver, Colorado, 1981.

5. The Harris survey (Louis Harris and Associates, *Survival literacy: conducted for the National Reading Council*. New York: Louis Harris and Associates, 1970) attempted to assess survival literacy skills as defined by the abilities required to complete various types of application forms (e.g., driver's license, social security benefits). Five forms were used, of which one (Application for Medicaid) had a disproportionately high failure rate. However, even when responses to this form are removed, 7.25 percent of the total adult population of the USA is estimated to be marginally literate at best.

6. C. A. Verbeke. Catepillar Fundamental English. *Training and Development Journal,* Febr., 1973 (unpaginated reprint, American Society for Training and Development).

7. Private communication.

8. See John S. Caylor, Ongoing R. & D. in Army literacy training. (In Thomas G. Sticht and Diane W. Zapf (Eds.), *Reading and readability research in the Armed Services*. Human Resources Research Organization, Alexandria, Virginia, 1976.)

9. Bernard Wishy. *The child and the republic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968.

10. Clifton Johnson. *Old-time schools and school-books*. New York: Dover, 1963, p. 134. [First published by Macmillan in 1904.]

11. Warren Burton. *The district school as it was*. Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1897, p. 9. [First published in 1833.]

12. Cited in C. Johnson, *Old-time schools,* p. 129.

13. Maxine Greene. *The public school and the private vision*. New York: Random House, 1965, p. 13.

14. G. L. Hendrickson. Ancient reading. *Classical Journal,* 1929-30, XXV, 182-196.

15. James Pyle Wickersham. *Methods of instruction*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1865, p. 208.

16. *McGuffey's Fifth Eclectic Reader,* 1879 edition [Reissued with a foreword by Henry Steele Commager. New York: Signet Classics, 1962.]

17. Edward Lee Thorndike. *Education, a first book*. New York: Macmillan, 1914.

18. Robert W. Woodworth. *Experimental psychology.* New York: Henry Holt, 1938.

19. Robert S. Woodworth and Harold Schlosberg. *Experimental psychology,* revised edition. New York: Henry Holt, 1954.

20. Irving H. Anderson and Walter F. Dearborn. *The psychology of teaching reading*. New York: Ronald Press, 1952.

21. Luella Cole. *Psychology of the elementary school subjects*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1934, p. 34.

22. Charles W. Eliot. *Educational reform*. New York: Century, 1898 [Reissued by Arno Press, 1969.]

23. The argument here is not against the teaching of a cultural view, but against the limited content of school readers. On the obligation of the school to teach cultural values, there is little argument. The United States Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education* (347 U. S. 483, 1954), stated: "Today it [education] is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment" (at 493).

24. Report of the National Committee on Reading. *Twenty-fourth yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, Part II. Bloomington, Ill.: Public School Publishing, 1925.

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DISCUSSION

Jay Featherstone

It is interesting that the fiction/non-fiction chasm is so profound that reading has come mainly to mean fiction in our schools. The sturdiness, the strengths of good writing that I saw in British classrooms in the 1960's was that much of the work was science writing and writing about things other than what we call "creative writing." The kids wrote about a lot of things.

It's a question of balance that you are arguing. I'm fascinated because one of the lines in American literature that most interests me is the long tradition Americans have of writing imaginatively about reality. Non-fiction writing is, in fact, one of the major modes of American literature. One of the great classics is the first half of Mark Twain's Life on the Mississippi which is very much Twain's own account of how he got an education. There is a long strain in American writing which shows, as one poet puts it, that reality sandwiches are one of the most interesting modes to write about. The problem I have, Richard, is to put your historical perspective and the argument you give in sensible terms, because one of the other historic threats to intelligent thinking about schooling in America is Philistinism and anti-intellectualism. In the current context, arguments for minimums have a way of turning into maximums. I'm afraid we are going to get another round of one education for the elite and one education for Orwell's "proles." It would be tragic if the accurate historic sense you have given us were translated into second-rate curriculum for proles and another curriculum for those worthy of fiction. I think the issue is not fiction versus non-fiction. I think the real problem both for the little bit of non-fiction reading and for the great deal of fiction reading that goes on in schools is the divorce of language and experiences. That is an equally grave problem for all modes of reading and writing because there is a disconnection between the kind of reading people do and any kind of experience that they might be having. I suggest that underlying your distinction is a more generic distinction on that mode. I think the threat of Philistinism and of a second-rate curriculum for second-rate people is so vivid now in the current political climate that I would be very worried about the implications of what you suggest if people didn't hear your very thoughtful interpretation of them.

David Olson

Richard's emphasis on comprehension is extremely well taken. I agree that our notions of comprehension have evolved and that our understanding of the mental activities involved in comprehension have improved. These developments give us a much better framework for thinking about reading and reading comprehension than we had even a decade ago. My paper also deals with those kinds of problems. However, the distinction between fiction and job-related or content-related types of reading is perhaps somewhat overstated. It seems to me that reading programs in the school attempt to acquaint students with a sufficiently broad range of expressions, registers, and genre in the language so that they have a general basis or general skill for all comprehension tasks. This skill can then be used for more specific purposes. It's often impossible to anticipate the precise use that anyone would want to put his or her language to or to exactly anticipate the job-related or the content-related types of linguistic structures that the child may have to deal with in adult life. Instead, it should be possible to develop a very general level of competence in the uses of language both in expression and in comprehension. That's the role that what is loosely called "narrative fiction" plays. Sometimes narrative fiction teaches important messages but more often it is also just showing the child the use of imagination in the comprehension and expression of language. As such, it is a fairly decent, general procedure for the elaboration of the child's linguistic skills.

Carman St. John Hunter

I think you gave a clue, Richard, about the problem of fiction and non-fiction when you said part of the problem is whose literature and whose heritage are we getting through the literature. Many people's literature and expression of their cultural background are excluded for a whole lot of reasons that are contained in those guidelines.

Richard Venezky

Let me respond first to the concern from Jay and David over whether the proper distinction here is fiction/non-fiction, or if there is a more important underlying issue, such as a concern with language and experience. I use the fiction/non-fiction distinction because that's what the schools use. Fiction very well could be used to teach all necessary reading skills that adults need to deal with in their lives. Unfortunately, what fiction has come to mean in the schools is not understanding the underlying language that is available

for the writer to say things, including the reasons that certain options are chosen. Nor does it mean anymore a vicarious reliving of the past, of fantasy worlds, of involvement in cultures other than those that one has grown up in. Instead, fiction has been boiled down to a group of little skills that for the most part children can and usually do acquire on their own. Recent studies of story grammars give support to this notion.

Learning what the plot of a story is, learning about characterization, predicting outcomes, and so on have become the bread and butter of comprehension instruction in today's schools. In many programs fiction has become synonymous with getting the main idea of the story. I don't disagree that good comprehension teaching could be based on literature. There are examples of all types of writing styles and forms in fiction. I would love to see both fiction and non-fiction used in the schools in a way that draws on the child's experience and that deals with language. One can find in such writers as Hawthorne marvelous, realistic descriptions of places and of objects that could be used to teach the same skills that are needed to read in a biology text when a forest or a swamp is described. Almost any of the skills that are needed to read social studies — such as development of events along time lines — can be found in fiction, too, but we don't use fiction for those purposes.

As for Americans fictionalizing reality, I think the content of readers has always reflected not what exists, but what people want society to be. We Americans are dreamers. We believe in things like the pastoral dream, yet we're also very practical people. I think it was D. H. Lawrence who noted that the Americans are always inventing machines to do something. "Let a machine do it." I think that's very much part of our national attitude, and I think schooling through the content of the readers, reflects this dichotomy between the ideal society on one hand and the creative, practical society on the other.

It's very interesting to note that, according to Frederick Jackson Turner, the frontier closed about the same time that elitism — as reflected in building reading only on good fiction — entered into our schooling practices. The new idea was (and still is) that we should make every American into a cultured citizen. We had accomplished everything else: we were a military power, an industrial power, we had settled the land. Now we were to compete with Paris and Rome and London in music and art and literature. That's what drove Charles W. Elliot and others to want good fiction to be the basis of reading programs: to build the cultured citizen. But the reality was, as I think Jay pointed out, that we had always been a very practical people.

I am not advocating a nuts and bolts approach to teaching reading comprehension. That's not what I'm after; instead, I want balanced instruction that attends to the total range of materials that children and adults encounter, including literature. We need to deal with fiction as well as with instructions on fire extinguishers, advertisements, science texts, and so on. What is needed is a little more balance in the reading selections and skills taught. Leslie Fielder, for example, has emphasized the importance of treating ephemeral writing. If ads, bubble gum wrappers, and so on are a worthy concern of the literary critic, then they also can be of the school. What I'm trying to say is that I would love to see literature taught better, but I also would like to see people taught how to understand the language of math stories as well as the language of literature. And the language of math story problems is quite different from the language of narrative fiction.

David Olson

It occurs to me that there is another way of realizing the interest you have expressed in a variety of types of reading activities. The usefulness of letting children read the scripts for television commercials would put them in a better position to see what the structure of that discourse is. Perhaps they would become somewhat capable of criticism of that genre just as they learn to be critical of certain types of prose and poetry. I would agree with Richard that there could be a considerable broadening of the kinds of things that children read and the kinds of critical activities that they engage in.

We have set up some polarities which probably will be useful for thinking about problems of literacy. Jay introduced the one between experience and language generally. One that Richard introduced was the distinction between fiction and other forms of writing. A third one I would like to put out for consideration is the difference between speaking and writing generally. When we talk about fiction as opposed to expository writing, for example, we should note that those are both forms of written discourse. One of the main difficulties with literacy is not just the variations in the types of things children read, but the fact that suddenly children are dealing with a written text as opposed to participating in an oral discussion. Certainly dealing with written text must bring additional considerations; reading makes demands on comprehension processes and on prior experiences that differ from those made in dealing with ordinary oral discourse.

Audience Participant

I want to corroborate Jay Featherstone's response. I did hear your paper, Professor Venezky, very much as an anti-intellectual statement. I was struck also by the contrast between Jay's opening comments and the thread of your particular presentation. Jay brought out the issue of fragmentation as an enemy and contributor to incompetency. He picked up on some of the old progressive ideas of building in the schools a writing, speaking, reading community. His discussion was about the holistic view of literacy. In your presentation you separated the notion of reading through the basal reader and the other kind of reading — 80% of which is non-narrative in the sixth grade — as something other than reading.

Richard Venezky

Perhaps the term reading is getting confused. What I'm talking about is what the schools today label as reading; that is, the entry in the daily lesson plan that in most schools, K through 8, is called "reading." There are also entities called reading programs that publishers produce, and also reading programs created by teachers. But my concern here is to deal with the reality in the schools. Why is it that the content of reading instruction in the schools (that is, literacy instruction) is so different from what we see adults reading on the streets? Why is it so different from what those very children choose to read when they walk out of their reading classes? My point in giving you those figures — which come from a very rough scan of reading instruction — is that these kids have to read their social studies text and their history book and their math story problems. Yet teachers are complaining more and more that the kids can't read these things. In fact, the child who does well in the sixth grade reader often cannot read a sixth grade social studies book with anywhere near the same comprehension. Some publishers are attacking that problem by reducing the readability (and concommitantly the content) of their content area materials, sometimes by two grade levels. I find that very frightening. I wasn't attending to the dream of integrating the liberal arts which has been realized already in a small number of schools. My concern here is to talk about the gap that exists between what instruction for literacy is today and what I see as adult literacy needs. I'm all for integrating liberal arts. I'm even in favor of throwing out of the schools completely a separate class called reading instruction after second or third grade, and moving what is now taught in such classes into the various content areas, including literature. Teach those skills needed to read litera-

ture in a literature class; teach those skills needed to understand the vocabulary and text structures of science texts in a science class. I think one of the problems we face in reading instruction is that we insist on dumping too large a load on a single strand in the curriculum.

Audience Participant

I don't think the question we are discussing is focused enough, because literacy for me as a teacher isn't a problem of the difference between what the schools are teaching and what adults need. The problem is that there are some students who are getting it and there are a great many others who aren't. If you want us all to follow your concluding directive, I would be very distressed because it feels as though we will have, as Jay said, an elitist society. We will further crystallize the difference between two groups of students. If there's one thing that comes out of the research on what makes effective schooling, it's the fact that you really need to set your expectations high. Your conclusion doesn't seem to go along with the idea of keeping expectations high for all students.

Richard Venezky

I'm not quite sure you and I are in the same place. I don't know where you teach, what kinds of problems you have, what you do in your classroom . . . .

Audience Participant I'm in an inner-city urban school.

Richard Venezky

My most recent experience is also in the inner-urban schools, doing case studies of both successful and unsuccessful school reading programs. Where we find successful reading instruction in an inner-urban school, we generally find a well-organized program that has people at various levels performing tasks that are appropriate for their levels. We find principals directing the curriculum, reading specialists serving as resources to the teachers, and teachers drawing on the full range of resources available through the school and the district to work with students. But we also see, as others do, that some school children come in ready to be taught, familiar with the curriculum, familiar with the school processes, and with a total support system outside the school to insure that they acquire what the school is trying to teach. Other students who do not come so well prepared and do not have the same support system have much more trouble in achieving well. One possibility is that differences in student performance are the re-

sult of the schools not teaching very much at all. For example, some studies on comprehension show that there's almost no direct instruction time for comprehension in the schools today. Yet some students learn to comprehend in spite of this, and the schools take credit for these students' achievements. If you feel that the thrust in schooling today should be to help those kids who in the past have not been helped very much, then you've got to make some decisions. Are you going to go on teaching reading comprehension with 90% literature while students need to learn how to read social studies and math texts?

Audience Participant

No one is saying that we want to take college bound students away from literature and have them start reading IRS forms or have them filling out job applications. We're saying that students who have real problems ought to have a curriculum centered around what they really need outside of school. I'm not clear why it's not a concern for students who are getting literature courses. How do we assume they will be able to do the things that are required of them as adults?

Richard Venezky

I am not advocating a dual curriculum. My concern is the approach to teaching reading to everyone. I don't mean to say that kids who tend to do poorly in reading ought to get the practical, vocational curriculum and the kids who tend to succeed ought to get fine literature and advanced skills. What I'm after is a change in the total teaching of reading so that it's balanced and draws on the full range of text-types and text experiences that are required to deal with everything one has to do in life. All I'm really saying is that there's a terrible imbalance now. Even those wonderful kids coming out of Shaker Heights and Oak Park in Chicago, who score so high on the SAT's, have had declining SAT verbal scores since the middle 1960's.

Audience Participant

I'd like to ask a question and make a point. How is what you have said related to your notions about child development? I think this needs to be addressed in relation to teaching reading. My comment is: I think people are picking up a signal that has to do with minimal competency. People are also picking up on the fact that we now have an elite culture. People don't want to accept or recognize it, but in fact we do have dual education: about

the age of ninth grade and on up, most kids who are getting literature are also getting advanced courses in science and math; while the other half are reading content area textbooks that are two or three grade levels below their own.

I'd like also to point out to Jay Featherstone that in making your opening remarks about your philosophy of integrating language instruction you did not mention reading.

Richard Venezky

In what way would I tap into the developing child? The first thing that comes to mind is that many good teachers have found that the first or second grade child is interested in a lot of things other than fiction. The child at that level likes to read baseball cards, road signs, and the like. In every culture, and in every region, there are dominant interests for different age levels. These are rarely incorporated into literacy programs. If we believe that motivation is a major issue in the early years of teaching literacy, then it would seem reasonable to ask that more of the environmental materials be included. But I wouldn't build a curriculum just on ability on the one hand, nor just on interest on the other. I would try to take both into account. One could then try to use current interest to build higher levels of ability.

Jay Featherstone

I'm sorry I left out reading. It seems to me that what is happening with reading is part of the basis for my concern about the fragmentation of language in the schools and in culture generally. When it comes to reading, my primary concern is that people study and read a significant text. I agree that the significant text is most important. I think that's the heart of the matter and that's why, when I see people doing workbooks, my heart sinks.

Audience Participant

I'm an attorney and I've been working with a group of people who have been challenging competency tests and programs in several cities, primarily in the state of Florida. Some of the things you have said really struck me, particularly with reference to the function of literacy tests. I've looked at those tests and they reflect a lot of the kinds of things I suspect you were talking about. At a gross level, we have looked at the curriculum in the school and the objectives of items in the test.

How do they teach metrics, and how do they test metrics? You've suggested to me now that it might be worth looking at the content of texts. It might be worthwhile looking more closely at some of those issues where we're trying to get a handle on whether or not the tests reflect accurately the things taught in the schools. Is the test a fair test? When you talk about the chasm, I wonder if it's worth looking into what kinds of reading material kids use in the schools as compared to what kinds of reading skills they're willing to acquire? A large number in our area are black kids. I question how much of their own life and culture is reflected in those tests. How much that has to do with how well they comprehend or how well they attend to what they are reading is a question. I wonder if you would have any thoughts about this or other avenues I might pursue.

Richard Venezky

It sounds to me as if you're already doing all the things I would suggest. I guess I would start by asking, "What are the stated goals of these programs within the schools?" Then I would make sure these are reasonable goals for the kinds of students going to those schools. I don't think it's enough to justify schooling goals on national standards or minimal national standards alone. Schools exist within communities and communities often have special interests and needs of their own. The main question is whether or not the school's goals are reasonable for the needs within the community, as well as within the state and country.