

*Reading Failure—
Is Method
at Fault?*

IN ALMOST EVERY class, there are some children who do not learn to read along with their classmates. These are the reading failures.

It is generally agreed that the true reading failure is not the child whose intelligence holds him back. Rather, he has all the necessary intellectual equipment, but has not been able to learn, or he does so slowly and with great difficulty.

My analysis of the research evidence on approaches to beginning reading would lack depth if I did not consider what is known about the relationship between method and reading failure as well as success. Does one approach produce more failures—or different kinds of failures—than another? Is one approach more successful in treating reading problems than another? Is there any action we can take to reduce the number of reading failures in the future?

To learn more about these questions, I analyzed six reports, veritable classics in the field, on case studies of pupils with reading problems. For further insight into how reading failures and retarded readers can be helped, I also examined four experimental studies of results with various remedial methods.

The Case-study Reports

During the time span covered by these six reports (1922 to 1946), the approach to teaching reading changed considerably. Thus, the children discussed in some reports received initial reading instruction that strongly emphasized phonics, while those in others received much less phonics. As a guide to what approach was most common at a given time, I used the historical account of Nila B. Smith (1963 and 1965). She indicates the following initial reading methods for the period 1890 to 1955:

1890–1920: Elaborate, synthetic phonic systems [were used] in which the child was started out immediately with practice on sounds of isolated letters and “family words” [hall, ball, tall, etc.].

1920–1935: The new emphasis became that of reading silently to get the thought and the use of phonics was looked upon as an outmoded procedure.

Experience charts were first introduced during this period. With the use of the experience chart children were initiated into reading instruction by reading, as a whole, a small unit of text which they had composed, after which the teacher called for the reading of sentences, phrases and words as she broke down the composition into smaller parts.

1935–1955: Phonics began to come back gradually . . . supplemented, however, with the use of picture clues, context clues, structural analysis and dictionary skills. Charts continued to be used for initial instruction in reading. (1963, pp. 1–2)

Two of the clinical reports (Gray, 1922; Gates, 1922) were published when phonics was being abandoned as a beginning method. However, since it takes a year or two to write up a study, and since the children involved probably received their initial reading instruction several years before, we may infer that most of them learned by a code-emphasis method, using some elaborate, synthetic-phonics system.

When the third study (Monroe, 1932) was published, “thought” methods were more common. Monroe’s pupils probably received their initial instruction under a heavy meaning emphasis.

Although the next two reports (Orton, 1937; Fernald, 1943) were published during a period when phonics was coming back gradually, supplemented with “picture clues, context clues, structural analysis and

the thirty cases were found to be maladjusted homes (55 percent of the children came from such homes), visual anomalies (in half of the cases), and emotional problems (in 32 percent). Incorrect reading methods, pertinent for 18 percent of the children, were fourth in importance.

Robinson stated that she did not evaluate the reading methods that had caused problems in 18 percent of the cases because she lacked the necessary information. But she also noted:

Since a large number of these severely retarded readers improved, it seems logical to assume that better adaptation of methods of teaching reading to some of the deviating cases has greater value than the number of such cases reported in this study indicates. (pp. 226–227)

In contrast to previous investigators, Robinson paid little attention to the “phonics versus sight” or decoding-emphasis versus meaning-emphasis issues, probably because by the middle 1940s there had been a return, *at least in theory*, to a combined sight-phonics approach. Her findings on emotional causes, buttressed, of course, by the writings of other psychologists, education specialists, and psychoanalysts, formed the basis of what became, in the late 1940s and 1950s, and remains to some extent today the prevalent approach to reading disability. Indeed, in 1960 the national sponsors of American Education Week (the National Education Association, the American Legion, the USOE, and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers), in a suggested advertisement for local newspapers based on the theme “What Teachers Know about Your Child,” said:

Typically, an elementary-school teacher, during a thirty-year career, will live with, work with, and love more than 1,000 children. . . . Teachers receive extensive training in child psychology. They learn to recognize signals of potential delinquency. . . . They learn that reading difficulties often result from emotional problems. . . .

The Experimental Studies

Four experimental studies tell us something about the effectiveness of different approaches for helping children who have had difficulties in learning to read.

The earliest (Currier, 1923) is only suggestive, describing what the author did with her own third-grade class. Dividing the class into three groups according to reading achievement, she gave the advanced children no phonics, the middle group (“careless, inattentive readers”) intensive phonics drills, and the lowest group (“foreign, poor, and retarded children”) an easy reading program designed to restore their confidence, followed by intensive phonics and word drills. All groups made good progress.

Currier concluded that not all children learn best from the same system; what is food for one can be poison for another. In essence, however, she did not vary the method according to the individual pupil's IQ, but according to his stage of reading attainment. Her treatment of the poorest-achieving group indicates that her conclusions were the same as mine on the interaction of IQ and method (see Chapter 4): For immediate results, a look-say method is a good choice because it is easier. But for more lasting results, even poor achievers must master phonics.

Burt and Lewis (1946) caution the reader not to generalize too much from their study, since they were concerned mainly with trying out a new statistical technique—analysis of variance. They compared four groups of eleven-year-old English children of low intelligence (IQs 79 to 83) who were retarded in reading, even considering their mental ages. Each group received one year of reading instruction with a different approach: visual (sight or whole word), kinesthetic (tracing and writing the words), alphabet (spelling), and phonic (sounding).

All the pupils improved. The visual group improved more than the others, but only 10 percent more than the least improved group. The kinesthetic approach was also more effective than the alphabet and phonic approaches. The authors cited the teachers' opinions that for the dull and backward, the best procedure is "active learning" based predominantly on a visual approach. They further noted that a mere change of method made for improvement. Their overall conclusion was that for ordinary dull and backward pupils, a phonic approach is too hard.

It is significant that the phonic method used in this experiment was quite difficult, even for normal children; for phonics instruction it used common, irregularly spelled, high-frequency words containing many exceptions to the phonic generalizations taught. Also, most of the pupils had received their initial instruction from a program emphasizing phonics; these children were denied the novelty effect experienced by the others.

Mills (1956) compared four methods of teaching word recognition to seven- to nine-year-olds in the second and third grades who were retarded in reading by six months. The four approaches were kinesthetic, phonic, visual, and a combination of these three. The children were compared on their ability to learn ten words in a fifteen-minute period. The words were selected on the basis of the frequency of their use in basal readers and were equated for difficulty on this basis.

Mills found some differences in effectiveness of methods by IQ: The children with IQs between 65 and 80 generally did best with the kinesthetic approach, but not significantly better than with a visual or combination approach. The phonic approach, which was the least effective overall, was significantly less helpful for these low-IQ pupils. For the children with IQs between 85 and 100, the visual and combination

approaches worked best; the phonic approach worked less well, but not significantly so. The kinesthetic approach was the least effective.

For the children with IQs between 105 and 120 all approaches seemed equally effective.

Thus, Mills found that the effectiveness of a phonic emphasis in particular depended on IQ—the lower his IQ, the less readily a retarded reader learned by a phonic approach compared with other approaches.

Again, however, the phonic approach used in this study relied on words of high frequency, many of which were irregularly spelled. The teacher sounded each letter separately, said the word, and then asked the pupil to do the same. Since many of the ten words to be learned in fifteen minutes could not be sounded letter by letter, and since the phonic elements of those which could be were not limited, learning from Mills's phonic method was a difficult task, especially for retarded readers of below-average intelligence.

The most extensive experimental study of methods of teaching retarded readers was made by Daniels and Diack (1956). They compared their phonic-word method with a mixed method (sight, then gradual phonics) using eight-year-old nonreaders. The Daniels and Diack method is probably easier than the phonic method used in the Burt and Lewis and the Mills studies. The method used by Daniels and Diack's control group also included phonics, but contained words selected on a meaning-frequency principle and often irregularly spelled. After one year, the phonic-word group tested higher in oral word recognition and sentence reading than the other group.

In summary, the research evidence tells us the following about the relationship between initial teaching method and failure to learn to read and about what we can do to help reading failures:

1. In answer to the overall question of whether reading failure stems primarily from the initial teaching method or from various characteristics of the child, I would say that both are involved. Analysis of the research evidence presented in this chapter (supported by analysis of other studies, my knowledge of current theories of disability, and my own experience in the diagnosis and treatment of reading and spelling disability) leads me to believe that we cannot blame reading failure—especially extreme disability—on either the child or the initial method alone. Severe disability seems to result when a child has a predisposition (a set of characteristics that make it difficult for him to associate printed symbols with their spoken counterparts) *and* is exposed to an initial method that ignores this predisposition.
2. The six clinical studies analyzed do not prove that any one method used during the initial stages of reading instruction produces more reading failures than any other. I am not really sure what method was initially

used with these cases. Also, none of the investigators indicated what proportion of the general school population his cases represented. To add to our difficulty, each investigator defined failure to learn to read differently. Gray even studied children with IQs as low as 53; today these children would not be considered reading failures.

Unless national surveys are taken in which the initial reading methods are described (not only by teachers and administrators, in their reports, but also by impartial observers) and in which pupils are tested over a long period, we will lack sufficient data to say how beginning methods influence general reading attainment and to what extent they cause reading failure.

3. The six case studies do indicate, however, that both broad approaches to beginning reading—a code emphasis and a meaning emphasis—produced *some* failures. In fact, dipping into the wealth of literature in this field, we find cases of severe reading and spelling disability described as early as 1896 (Wyckoff) and 1907 (Witmer) in the United States and 1893 (W. P. Morgan) in England, when the predominant beginning methods stressed a code start. Thus, a “wrong” or “inadequate” method cannot be the only cause of severe reading disability.

4. No matter how the readers in the six case studies had been taught initially, they all shared the same problem: extreme difficulty with *decoding* (not with comprehension). Indeed, the true reading-disability pupil can be described as follows: He is intelligent enough to understand the stories that other children of his age and mental ability can read (when these are read to him), but he cannot read them himself—because he cannot identify the words. Even if he learns to read silently, he often does poorly with spelling and oral reading, both of which have stronger decoding components than silent reading.

5. Most of the authors of these case studies noted that lack of interest in reading and in schoolwork were the *results*, not the *causes*, of reading difficulty. Specific reading problems like poor comprehension and slow rate were also noted as results of lack of skill in decoding. Most of the children with reading difficulties were interested in learning to read. Once they achieved some success in decoding skills, they acquired an interest in reading and in schoolwork, and they were able to overcome their specific reading problems.

6. There is *considerable* evidence from all the case studies except Robinson's (and she admittedly was not concerned primarily with method) that an initial reading method that emphasized “word,” “natural,” or “speeded” reading at the start and provided insufficient or inconsistent training in decoding produced *more serious* reading failures than one that emphasized the code. Three of the authors (Orton, Fernald, and Monroe) were firmly convinced that sight methods that inhibit oral responses and other kinds of movements and articulation in their immediate pursuit of smooth, speedy silent reading had caused many of the failures they diagnosed and

treated. They concluded that at least some children need to learn the written code for the spoken language in a more systematic way and to be encouraged to use "lower-order" responses such as tracing, writing, pointing, sounding, etc.

Gates, who has erroneously been associated with a "pure sight" approach to beginning reading, wrote in 1922 that the first cause of backwardness among his cases was probably "learning wholly by the 'natural' method or 'word' method." And Gray, who since the 1920s has called for a meaning-emphasis approach to regular classroom instruction of beginners, listed inadequate (insufficient) training in phonics in his 1922 report as the seventh most important cause for failure among his cases, before inadequate attention to content, which he ranked eighth.

7. There is some evidence that a heavy emphasis on phonics (or "wrong" phonics) as a starting method produced problems in some children. Thus, Gates noted the slow rate and poor comprehension of children who over-articulated and overreacted to individual letters and sounds, and he thought these difficulties might have been the result of too much phonics training in the first grade. However, he appears to have solved this problem rather easily by encouraging the pupils to concentrate more on content in reading.

Orton noted that merely teaching the sound values of the letters—which some teachers called "following a phonic method"—was ineffectual for some students. Such training, he believed, was not valuable unless followed by adequate practice in blending (or fusing) the separate sound values to form words.

8. The remedial-reading treatments described in these six case-study reports concentrated on teaching the child to decode printed words. That is, all cases received some kind of training in learning how to recognize and identify words independently. This training ranged from a primarily visual type of analysis, starting with syllables and progressing to larger units, to remedial procedures of a more mechanical nature, using kinesthetic aids. Some used phonic procedures involving blending. All investigators reported success with their treatments. Especially significant is the fact that once the hurdle of learning the code was overcome, the formerly disabled reader was able to read with understanding, speed, and enjoyment.

9. The experimental studies that compared phonic approaches with other approaches to helping disabled readers also showed that such approaches, if properly designed, achieve good results. Progress may be slower with a phonic emphasis than with other approaches, but the end results are probably more satisfactory. However, my analysis of these studies indicated that the difficulty of the phonic method makes a difference in its effectiveness with poor readers. A simplified phonic approach which uses words controlled for spelling regularity is more effective than a phonic emphasis that uses common, irregularly spelled words for practice.

After long and sometimes arduous travels through the mass of research on beginning reading, we are left with two questions: Why did those responsible for teaching children how to read ignore the evidence? Where does this evidence leave us?

The first of these questions raises the subject of what other factors besides research results determine how children are taught to read. In Sections 3 and 4 we move away from the world of numbers and percentages and into the world of classrooms, publishing houses, and PTA meetings. First we examine the basal-reading programs—the most widely used reading materials. Then we look at the environment in which reading programs are written, sold, adopted, and used. Research findings, we shall discover, are probably only a minor influence on the choice of beginning reading materials and methods.

As for the second question, my recommendations, which grow out of the entire inquiry, are presented in Section 5. Here I can say briefly that it would seem, at our present state of knowledge, that a code emphasis—one that combines control of words on spelling regularity,¹ some direct teaching of letter-sound correspondences, as well as the use of writing, tracing, or typing—produces better results with unselected groups of beginners than a

¹ Although not complete control of one sound for one symbol (see Levin, 1963).

meaning emphasis, the kind incorporated in most of the conventional basal-reading series used in schools in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

A similar code emphasis, clinical studies indicate, also helps children who are predisposed to reading and spelling difficulty. The clinical studies also indicate that such children need to use responses other than purely visual (ideational) ones at the beginning stages of reading and spelling and that the use of more oral, articulatory, and kinesthetic responses at the beginning does not prevent the child from becoming a normal reader later on, as so many have feared.

For children predisposed to severe reading disability, there are strong indications that schools should use diagnostic techniques to identify them early so that they may receive the special training they require and be spared frustration and failure in later years of learning. We have reason to believe, however, that other children who might fail can be helped—and that normal children can become better readers—with classroom instruction that concentrates more on breaking the code than most current programs do.

THE BASAL-READING SERIES—AS BAD AS THE CRITICS SAY?

***D**ESPITE recent innovations, most children in America still learn to read from a few widely distributed sets of instructional materials called basal-reading series. Critics of the prevailing view are, in effect, criticizing these materials.*

If you read the angry words of critics and defenders in the reading controversy—even if you read them carefully—you are not likely to gain any consistent picture of what a basal series is like. Thus, Flesch made the flat statement that American children learn by the “word” method—that they are not taught any phonics at all. This statement was wholeheartedly denied in the educational press, where every reviewer of the book affirmed that phonics, as well as “other means of identifying words,” was in fact being taught. However, half of the book reviews in the mass magazines agreed with Flesch that phonics was not being taught. The other half were noncommittal.¹

*Among other accusations made by Flesch (also made in 1962 by Trace in *What Ivan Knows That Johnny Doesn't*) was that the basal readers are dull and repetitious because of their rigid vocabulary control. Reviewers in the mass magazines unanimously agreed. Most of the educational reviews—two-thirds of them—again dissented (Riedler, 1962).*

¹ Terman and Walcutt, later (1958) critics of prevailing methods, were less drastic, reporting that phonics was taught in American schools, although neither sufficiently nor well.

What is the evidence for these claims and counterclaims?

To find out, I asked the authors and an editor of three widely used basal-reading series a number of questions about the philosophy behind the basal-reading programs. (These were the same four people whose general views on issues in the debate are given in Chapter 2.) I present their answers in the next chapter, along with a brief discussion of what the basal series contain and their importance in beginning reading instruction. In Chapter 8, I report on an analysis of the two series most widely used during the height of the debate—the late 1950s and early 1960s. This analysis was aimed at obtaining quantitative information on the teaching methods proposed by the basal series in wide use. Such information, I hoped, would allow me to form more substantial qualitative judgments than either side in the debate has yet been able to supply. I also analyzed a newer series with a stronger phonic emphasis and investigated a more recent edition, as well as previous editions, of one of the two leading series to determine trends in several characteristics over the years.

Before we begin the detailed analysis of the basal series, here are a few of the major findings of this effort. (Again, however, I urge the reader to go through the data presented in this section to gain an understanding of the bases for these findings as well as for my conclusions about the basal series, which appear at the end of the section.)

Children using the leading basal readers of the late 1950s and early 1960s are taught by a sight or word method. The preprimers start the child off on learning to read words, and throughout the primary grades—up through the 3-2 book for the end of the third grade—words are pretaught. What about phonics and the alphabet? They are taught too, but they receive much less emphasis. Indeed, one has to look rather hard to

find any phonics (or code-learning) exercises, so well are they integrated with the other "follow-up" activities.

Most of the practice suggested is on "understanding the stories." Questions and answers on the stories and the pictures take up most of the time the class spends on the readers. The follow-up activities, too, reflect this strong meaning emphasis.

Throughout the primary grades, the programs of both series lean heavily on the teacher. Very few self-directed pupil activities are provided or suggested.

Of the three major modes of responding to questions, practicing skills, and engaging in follow-up activities—silent reading, oral reading, and writing—silent reading predominates; the pupil does little oral reading or writing.

The newer basal readers that have a phonic start incorporate some changes, but they also retain many of the features of the conventional basals.

My comparison of the 1962 and 1956 editions of one of the conventional basal series shows a trend toward a heavier code emphasis; phonics is taught earlier, and more practice is devoted to it.

Table 8-20 Comparison of First-grade Follow-up Activities in Two Scott, Foresman Editions

Average lesson	1956	1962
Total follow-up activities	8.0	5.6
<i>Percentage of total follow-up activities involving:</i>		
Reading comprehension	19	32
Word meaning	0	4
Whole-word recognition	13	14
Phonetic and structural analysis	13	25
Independent silent reading	9	4
Oral language	13	7
Literary appreciation	13	14
Art	6	0
Music	6	0
Other	8	0
Total	100	100
<i>Mode of response:</i>		
Reading:		
Silent	28	43
Silent and oral	6	7
Oral	18	29
Total reading	52	79
Listening and discussing	39	21
Nonlanguage	9	0
Total mode of response	100	100
Writing (in addition to others)	0	4
<i>Teacher direction:</i>		
Teacher directs completely	72	57
Teacher directs partly	19	43
Pupil does independently	9	0
Total	100	100

constitute one-quarter of all exercises, as opposed to 13 percent in the 1956 edition.

More follow-up activities require reading; fewer require just listening and discussing. Writing, never suggested in the 1956 edition for first graders, is to be used in 4 percent of the 1962 activities.

The teacher is somewhat less important in the 1962 edition follow-up activities; she is indispensable for 57 percent of the activities, as opposed to 72 percent in the previous edition.

THE SCOTT, FORESMAN READING PROGRAM SINCE 1920

By combining my analysis of the Scott, Foresman first-grade (1-2) readers of 1956 and 1962 with a similar analysis by Marion Klein (1964) of the 1920, 1930, and 1940 editions, I was able to make a limited study of changes during this forty-two-year period (see Table 8-21).

A major change is the steady decrease in vocabulary load—from 2.4 new words per 100 running words in 1920 to 1.4 in 1956. This trend is reversed in the 1962 edition, as we have seen.

From 1920 to 1962, more and more space is devoted to illustrations. Until 1962 the picture load (number of pictures per 100 running words) increases steadily, becoming heavier than the vocabulary load (number of new words per 100 running words) in the 1956 edition. This trend appears to have stopped with the 1962 edition, in which the child meets more new words than new pictures per 100 words read.

The teachers' manuals have changed even more than the readers (see Table 8-22). From 1920 to 1962 they have grown steadily. By the 1956 edition, the introductory sections of the teachers' manuals became a veritable textbook on the teaching of reading. There appears to be a stabilization of "weightiness" in the 1962 edition.

From 1920 to 1962 the teacher is given more and more suggestions and directions for each lesson, i.e., for teaching new words, guiding the story, and directing a variety of follow-up activities. In the 1920 edition about 561 words of instruction to the teacher accompany the average lesson. Lesson plans in the 1956 edition are so elaborate and detailed that the teacher using this edition has to wade through five pages of tightly packed print—about twenty-three hundred words. Remember that during the 1940s teachers began the current practice of dividing classes into three reading groups and preparing a different lesson for each group.

Table 8-21 Comparison of Various Characteristics of First-grade (1-2) Readers in Five Scott, Foresman Editions

	1920	1930	1940	1956	1962
Pages per average story	4	6	5	5	4
Words per average page	83	64	59	61	58
Running words per average story	333	385	295	305	230
New words per average story	8.0	8.0	5.0	4.3	4.2
New words per 100 running words	2.4	2.1	1.7	1.4	1.9
New (different) words in entire book	425	282	178	177	153
Pictures per average story	3.0	5.0	4.0	4.8	3.8
Pictures per 100 running words	0.9	1.3	1.4	1.6	1.7

Table 8-22 Comparison of Aids to the First-grade Teacher in Five Scott, Foresman Editions

	1920	1930	1940	1956	1962
Total pages in manual	157	192	192	244	256
Pages devoted to general philosophy	None	32	25	46	15 (plus 25 pp. of special articles)
Words of instruction to teacher per average lesson (story and follow-up)	561	814	1,266	2,300	2,000

Thus, not only has the amount of instructional material for each lesson been increasing, but the teacher's task has been tripled.

Why have the manuals grown and grown? Partly, as Klein notes, because the 1920 and 1930 manuals simply list the words or phonic elements to be taught, while the 1940 and later manuals embed these in both general and specific suggestions. Also, beginning with the 1940 edition some suggestions—particularly for establishing background and guiding the reading—are given in the exact words that the teacher is to speak. And from 1920 on, the guided-reading section has become increasingly more elaborate: while the 1920 edition contains one comprehension question for the teacher to ask for every forty-seven words read by the child, the 1962 edition suggests one question for every twelve words read (see Table 8-23).

Table 8-23 Comparison of Guided-reading Sections in the Teachers' Guidebooks of Five Scott, Foresman Editions: The First-grade Program

	1920	1930	1940	1956	1962
Words per average story	333	385	295	305	230
Questions on text per average story	7	15	12	22	19
Words child reads per question asked by teacher	47	26	25	14	12

Although the analysis of basal series and the philosophy behind them presented in the last two chapters has been primarily descriptive, at various points I raised questions on content, emphasis, sequencing, and pacing. Here I want to highlight some of these questions.

I do not do so merely to criticize the basal series. Indeed, these programs have become too easy a target for faultfinding. In contrast with many critics, I believe that most children need readers or some kind of structured materials, especially at the beginning, to gain the mastery that will enable them ultimately to enjoy the marvels of Alice in Wonderland and Gulliver's Travels. And most teachers need them even more to impart this mastery. Since the conventional basal series already have the confidence of administrators and teachers, their authors and publishers are in a unique position to translate what we know about teaching reading into classroom practice. It is in the hopes of helping them realize this opportunity that I raise my questions.

First, is the heavy reliance on a word method—so basic to these series—justified? Should the basals start with and continually stress throughout the first three grades the whole-word, or configuration, approach to learning words, giving only minor attention to the alphabetic-phonetic aspects of these words? As we have seen, the experimental, correlational, and clinical evidence indicates that a code emphasis is the better way to start.