
Reading & Early Childhood Education: *The Critical Issues*

by Jeanne S. Chall*

Here are some thoughtful answers to the five most important questions about teaching.

The evidence keeps growing on the critical importance of the early years in the development of literacy. Indeed, the recent National Assessment of Educational Progress¹ confirms earlier research that if we wish to have junior and senior high school students read better, we must see to it that they do better in preschool and in the early school years. But there are still a number of controversial issues concerning the teaching of reading—particularly early reading. Some of these issues are relatively new while others have been debated and researched in the past. I believe that a discussion of new and classic issues in the teaching of reading will assist principals and teachers of young children in making reasoned judgments about policy and instruction. I have selected five issues that seem to most concern teachers and administrators, and that are often the themes of journal articles and conference presentations:

Is reading always the same or does it undergo developmental changes?

This is a classic issue that has been discussed and debated for generations. Some scholars have viewed reading as essentially the same from its beginnings to

its most mature forms. Others have viewed it as a process that changes as it develops.²

Each viewpoint leans on theory to support its view. However, from my study of the issue, there is more evidence from research and successful practice for a developmental view. What recommends a developmental view most is its usefulness. It provides help in what and when to teach, for developing reading materials and tests, and for ways to find and diagnose those with reading difficulties.

In *Stages of Reading Development*,³ which is being used in planning school-wide reading curricula, instructional materials, the construction of reading tests, and research, I have proposed a developmental scheme that includes six stages, from 0 to 5, covering prereading to highly skilled reading. Although I am concerned here with reading in the early childhood years, I present all of the reading stages to give insight into what precedes and follows the early school years.

Stage 0, Prereading, from birth to about age six, is characterized by growing control over language. Current estimates are that average six-year-olds can speak or understand about 5,000 words. During the prereading stage, most children living in a literate society acquire some knowledge and insight into print, and learn to recognize letters, common signs, and common words. Many can write their names and pretend they can read a story that has been read to them several times.

Stage 1, Initial Reading or Decoding (Grades 1-2), involves the alphabetic principle—developing skills and insight into sound-letter relations and into the decoding of words not recognized immediately. Chil-

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dren learn to recognize the words in their books, and to “understand” the material they read. But what they can read at this stage is considerably below what they can understand in speech. Their ability to decode and recognize printed words is limited but growing rapidly.

Stage 2, Confirmation, Fluency, and Ungluing from Print (Grades 2-3), consolidates what students have learned earlier in the recognition of words and in the use of decoding skills to help them gain further insight into the reading and comprehending of familiar texts. By the end of this stage, they have developed fluency and ease in recognizing words, in “sounding” others they do not recognize immediately, and in “predicting” still others from context. The material that they can read fluently is basically within their knowledge linguistically and cognitively.

Stage 3, Learning the New (Grades 4-8), marks the beginning of reading as a tool for acquiring knowledge, feelings, values, insights, and attitudes. It is at this stage that the books students read go beyond their everyday vocabularies, beyond their background knowledge, and beyond simple narrative presentation.

Stage 4, Multiple Viewpoints (High School), requires more complex language and cognitive abilities, since the reading tasks involve more complex texts in many more advanced content areas. Students are also required to comprehend varying viewpoints at ever greater depth.

Stage 5, Construction and Reconstruction (College Level), the most mature stage, is characterized by a world view. Students read books and articles in the detail and depth that they need for their own purposes. Readers in Stage 5 know what *not* to read as well as what to read. Reading here is basically constructive. From reading what others say, students construct knowledge for their own use.

From these very brief characterizations one can see qualitative changes from stage to stage, with a major qualitative change at Stage 3, which marks the end of the primary grades (the early childhood years) and beginning of the intermediate grades. Stages 0, 1, and 2 can be said to represent the oral tradition, in that text read at these stages rarely goes beyond the language and knowledge that the reader has previously acquired through listening and direct experience. Stages 3, 4, and 5 (Grades 4 and beyond) may be viewed as comprising the literary tradition—when the reading content, as well as the language read, goes beyond what is already known.

Thus, reading at Stage 3 can be seen as the beginning

of a long progression in the reading of texts that become ever more complex, literary, abstract, and technical, and that require more worldly knowledge and ever more sophisticated language and cognitive abilities. The materials that are typically read at Grade 4 and beyond show distinctive changes in content, in linguistic complexities, and in the cognitive demands on the reader when compared to those generally read in Grades 1 to 3.

It is important to note that teachers and other school personnel have long been aware of this distinction. They have often considered the primary grades as the time for “learning to read” and the intermediate and upper elementary grades as a time of “reading to learn.” In the early grades, the main task is to bring students’ word recognition and decoding up to their more advanced linguistic and cognitive levels. From Grade 4 on, the main task is to raise students’ language and cognitive abilities to meet the demands of their texts—a more difficult task, indeed.

Reading stages can contribute to a better understanding of how reading is acquired and how the total environment, as well as the school environment and instruction, may be made optimal for pupils at the different stages. For example, most children who enter first grade (beginning of Stage 1) need to acquire a knowledge of the alphabetic principle—how the letters relate to the sounds of the language, or how to “sound out” words. While some children may discover this principle by themselves, the research evidence over the past 70 years is overwhelming that direct instruction is needed and contributes to better development of decoding, word recognition, and comprehension, and provides a better transition to later reading stages.⁴ This is because the relations between sounds and letters are usually not discovered without instruction by most children, particularly those at high risk. Toward the end of the decoding stage, the knowledge and skills acquired can become self-generative. That is, some growth can be achieved with practice on one’s own.

Stage 2 (Grades 2 and 3), the development of fluency, requires a great deal of reading and practice. This would suggest the necessity for providing many books to be read in addition to texts and workbooks.

With the skills and abilities acquired in Stages 1 and 2, the focus of reading instruction in the middle grades should be on literature and on reading in the various subject areas—textbooks, reference works, and other sources.

While a developmental theory does not prescribe methods, it does suggest the need for certain practices

in order for more advanced levels of achievement to take place. Thus, it would appear that a global and playful approach, while suitable for developing “readiness” and “emergent” skills in pre-school and kindergarten, would be less effective in Grades 1 and 2, when children need to acquire decoding and word recognition skills, and should be reading many books to gain fluency.

For the intermediate grades (Stage 3), or earlier if children are more advanced, instruction in reading should go beyond the familiar in content, in language, and in thought. Therefore, reading instruction needs to be given not only from basal readers, which contain mainly narrative fiction, but from texts and books in social studies, science, health, and literature. For most children, a greater focus on word meanings is needed since their reading materials contain a greater proportion of abstract, technical, and literary words not known to them.

Should we teach reading skills or let children learn by “just reading”?

Each generation asks this question in a somewhat different way, and tends to have answers that vary.

At the present time, the question to be decided is whether to provide reading instruction with basal readers and workbooks, or children’s story books. Two decades ago, the question was: Which is better, individualized reading (self-selection of trade books) or group instruction? Another related question that has been debated for more than a century, concerns the use of phonics. Is it necessary to teach phonics? Don’t children learn better without sounding or decoding words?

All of these questions have one essential point in common: Do children learn to read better, and love it more, if they are taught *how* to read, or if they figure it out by themselves by “just reading”?

The evidence from research would seem to indicate that both are needed for optimal reading development. Knowing how (reading skills) is necessary, but not sufficient; and learning from “just reading” bogs down when the student’s skills are deficient. The mass of the research on reading indicates that better results are achieved when young children are taught skills systematically and directly, and use these in reading. It also shows that being read to and reading and writing stories, poems, and informational selections—to which they apply their newly gained skills—are also important for reading development.

At each of the reading stages, a balance of “learning how-to” with “practicing and doing” is needed. Too

great an emphasis on skills may deprive children of time to read. Similarly, a diet of “just reading” without instruction in the skills may slow down development. The research does not support the claims of some that skills and know-how develop naturally from “just reading.” Indeed, it shows that development is *enhanced* by skills, particularly among those making slower progress—children from low-income homes and those at high risk for learning disability.⁵

Ironically, although the strongest argument proposed for the “just reading” view is a love of reading, there seems to be no evidence to back it up. Indeed, negative evidence can be found from the fact that some of the greatest writers and readers have been educated in schools that taught reading mainly as skill development.

How easy or hard should instructional reading materials be?

Research and theory during the past decade have found that books that are challenging—at or somewhat above the student’s reading level—produce higher reading achievement than easier books, particularly when the teacher provides instruction. Research in the Harvard Reading Laboratory which related the difficulty of school textbooks, used from Grade 1 to Grade 12, to SAT verbal scores found that when harder textbooks were used, the students achieved higher SAT scores. Easier books produced lower scores. Further, the difficulty of the *first-grade* books seemed to exert the greatest effect.⁶ Why should first grade be so important? We suggest that it is probably because it is when the child is introduced to the alphabetic/writing system of our language. It is difficult for most children to discover the system for themselves. Hence a stronger, more difficult program in the first grade prepares the child for later stages, which can be practiced even if less direct instruction is provided.

These findings are backed up by the Russian psychologist Vygotsky, whose theory of proximal development proposes that the optimal level of instruction is one above the student’s current development, but at which the student can learn when instructed by a teacher.

Thus, teachers should take pains to see that the books used for instruction are not too easy. In our study of the reading, writing, and language of low SES children in grades 2 to 7, we found that the greatest reading gains were made by students who were learning from basal readers at or above their reading level—but not below.⁷ And yet children continue to receive

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instruction from basal readers below their level. Since most instructional time for reading involves the use of basal readers, it is essential that these readers contain materials that challenge all students—including those who read above level.

Additional evidence for the value of challenging instructional materials comes from recent research on classroom grouping. Several studies have found that when children in the lowest reading group were placed in a group that used more difficult materials, they actually did better.

This concept needs to be considered by all of us, for it goes counter to the conventional wisdom of book selection for the past 50 years—the easier, the better.

To test or not to test?

Attitudes toward reading tests have been quite conflicting. We give more and more tests, and we seem increasingly dissatisfied with them, even to the point of rejecting them and research results that are based on them. There is also a fear that the increasing use of tests will lead to teaching for the tests. And yet, when test scores rise, we are happy to accept the results as evidence of hard work by teachers, administrators, and students.

It is easy to overlook the benefits of tests—for evaluating programs, for assessing children's reading development, for noting their strengths and weaknesses. Tests also help us find those children who are falling behind and need extra help.

And yet, I have found that few schools make full use of the tests that they give. Many do not seem to use the results to evaluate a child's reading development from year to year, to make sure that progress is being made as expected. Although standardized tests leave much to be desired, combined with teacher judgment they can be used constructively for this purpose since they are highly predictive of later achievement. Thus Grade 2 reading scores predict Grade 6 scores, and the Grade 6 scores predict whether students will graduate high school or will drop out—if no special help is given to those who need it.⁸

What about research? Does it improve practice?

The mass of research on reading, and the highly technical way in which it is written, often intimidates school administrators, policy makers, and teachers. I think sometimes that this growing mass of research has tended to produce an attitude that, while it is well and good, it has little to do with practice. One can well understand this view, for it is difficult, if not impossible, to keep up with all the research published.

And yet, my long years in both research and practice have not lessened my confidence in the value of re-

search for informing practice. Knowing is always better than not knowing.

While research can help administrators make teaching and policy decisions, it is wise to realize that one study on an issue, by itself, is usually not sufficient to inform successful practice. It is recommended, therefore, that teachers and school administrators rely on syntheses of research—reports that sift through and interpret related studies on specific topics.

I hope that this brief discussion of major issues in reading will be of some assistance to principals and administrators who must devise and direct early childhood reading programs. It's an enormous responsibility. ♦

Notes

1. National Assessment of Educational Progress, *The Reading Report Card: Progress Toward Excellence in Our Schools; Trends in Reading over Four National Assessments, 1971-1984* (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1985).
2. For an overview of the two views, see J.S. Chall and S.A. Stahl, "Initial Reading Methods," in *The Encyclopedia of Education*, eds. T. Husen and T.N. Postlethwaite (Oxford: Pergamon, 1985). For views of reading as "unchanging," see K. Goodman and Y. Goodman, "Learning to Read Is Natural," in *Theory and Practice of Early Reading*, eds. L. Resnick and P. Weaver, vol. 1 (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1979), and F. Smith, *Reading Without Nonsense*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1985). For developmental views, see J.S. Chall *Stages of Reading Development* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983); D. La Berge and S.J. Samuels, eds., *Basic Processes in Reading: Perception and Comprehension* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977); C. Perfetti, *Reading Ability* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and R.C. Anderson et al., *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading* (Champaign, Ill.: The National Academy of Education and The Center for the Study of Reading, 1985).
3. Chall, *Stages of Reading Development*.
4. J.S. Chall, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967; updated ed., 1983); Perfetti, *Reading Ability*; Anderson et al., *Becoming a Nation of Readers*; and *What Works* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1986).
5. See in this connection B. Bettelheim and K. Zelan, *On Learning to Read: The Child's Fascination with Meaning* (New York: Knopf, 1982), and J.S. Chall, "Reading and the Unconscious" (review of Bettelheim and Zelan), *Contemporary Education Review* 2 (Spring 1983): 7-11.
6. J.S. Chall, S. Conard, and S. Harris, *An Analysis of Textbooks in Relation to Declining S.A.T. Scores* (Princeton, N.J.: College Entrance Examination Board, 1977).
7. J.S. Chall and C. Snow, *Families and Literacy: The Contribution of Out-of-School Experiences to Children's Acquisition of Literacy*, Final Report to the National Institute of Education, December 1982.
8. B. Bloom, *Human Characteristics and School Learning* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976).
9. J.S. Chall, *School and Teacher Factors and the NAEP Reading Assessments*, position paper prepared for the Committee on the Evaluation of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in Reading, August 1986 (available from ERIC).