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Invitations to Michigan Literacy: Our Legacies

Dr. Elaine Weber is a language arts consultant for the Macomb Intermediate School District. She delivered this address at the 1999 MRA Conference on March 13.

Billie Collins in his literary piece titled *First Reader* begins:

I can see them standing politely on the wide pages that I was still learning to turn. Jane in her blue jumper, Dick with his crayon-brown hair, playing ball and exploring the cosmos of the backyard, unaware that they are the first characters, the boy and the girl who begin fiction.

For fewer and fewer, this is true. For the growing majority of you, fiction began with others. For you, Billie Collins continues:

It was always Saturday and he and she were always pointing at something and shouting, "Look." Pointing at the dog, the bicycle, the wagon, the postman.

And his piece ends where our past begins:

They wanted us to look, but we had looked already and seen the shaded lawn, the wagon, the postman ... now it was time to discover the infinite, clicking permutations of the alphabet's small and capital letters. Alphabetical ourselves in rows of classroom desks, we were forgetting how to look, learning how to read."

Over the past three decades, we have been exploring ways to engage the readers, to connect them to what they are reading, to make reading a meaningful activity, a way students can keep looking, while they are learning how to read.

The journey began with a move out of *Our Neighbors*, leaving Dick and Jane's family of original parents, one working father and one aproned mother, three children, one dog, one cat, and one teddy called Tim. They no longer represented the majority of us, and they no longer—I am not sure they ever did—engage us to look and wonder.

We tried out many new characters who would escort the "wannabe" readers over the bumpy terrain of the first primers. We also tried many techniques to make reading easier to master: We tried words in color. For the sounds not represented by symbols we made up new symbols, new spellings. We rewrote the text so that it was decodable, codeable and recodeable. We shaped the words into patterns to make them memorable, organized them in families, and arranged them linguistically.

Words were printed on cards—one per card—and then flashed at the reader with increasing faster and faster flashes. Word cards were slid through speaking machines, displayed on

videos filmstrips, hidden behind the shutter of the tachistoscope—with and without pictured clues. Strings of words were paraded past the eye movement machine while it calculated the time of the union of the focus of the eye on the precise place it landed on the letter or word.

To remember the words, readers, with fingers drawn, traced letters in sand, underwater, with Play Dough, or on the back of a partner. Words were sliced into syllables, counted, and put into formulas of understandability. Letters were dressed like people—given names, personalities and settled in alphabet-people communities.

All this to make it easier for children to learn to read.

... copious records were kept on each student's mastered objectives, and from this process we learned something we already knew: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

We were interested in more than just decoding the words. We wanted the readers to look, to be engaged, to understand what they were reading.

In order to do this, the task was layered. After learning to decode the words, next students learned the meaning of the word. That was vocabulary. After vocabulary, they learned the actual translation of the text, literal comprehension. And finally they learned what the author didn't say but wanted the reader to know ... that was inferential comprehension.

Then came teaching and testing to see if students had learned to comprehend. It was difficult then and

continues to challenge us today.

A technique learned from business at the end of the sixties was applied to education, and the seventies were spent reducing academic disciplines into teachable-learnable-sequenceable-measurable-masterable chunks called behavioral objectives. Turning the reading curriculum into objectives became a limitless quest. In fact on all teachers' release days, during professional development sessions and as a major activity of inservice, educators were required to work toward creating smaller and smaller masterable units. The goal was to make reading more palatable for the learner and more manageable for the teachers. In practice, copious records were kept on each student's mastered objectives, and from this process we learned something we already knew: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. (I hope we are not having to learn this all over again.)

During this same period of time, the Michigan Legislature asked the State Department of Education to develop a test of reading and mathematics for all fourth- and seventh-grade students in Michigan. Objectives were still in vogue, so a lone MDE reading consultant in the solitude of his office wrote a set of reading objectives to become the basis for this state-wide assessment. This sent up red flags for members of Michigan Reading Association, and prior to the first administration of the assessment, Clarence Brock, president of MRA, along with a contingent of members went to the Michigan Department of Education challenging the objectives and requesting to be part of the process of developing objectives and designing the state assessment. The threats to boycott resulted in a partnership between MDE and MRA which remains today.

From that first set of objectives in the mid-seventies to the current set of English Language Arts Standards and Benchmarks, MRA has played a significant role, including influencing a major reform in comprehension, the definition of reading in the early eighties.

Many of the reading firsts began in Michigan. Ken and Yetta Goodman were at Wayne State University when they developed Miscue Analysis and a view of reading as a psycholinguistic process. Harry Hahn at Oakland University had students in classrooms all over the state engaging in language encounters. Much of the thinking about secondary

reading and reading in the content areas was reshaped by Charlie Peters at Oakland Schools. Dorsey Hammond and Ann Marie Palinscar guided us to teach students how to comprehend the text. Scott Paris shared the strategies students used as they read, and at the time Michigan was searching for a new definition of reading, Karen Wixson, a newly graduated Ph.D. took a reading position at the University of Michigan. She brought with her her recent research and her friendships with a cadre of actively involved, highly focused reading researchers, who were pondering and making sense of these new ideas about reading. To name a few: David Pearson, Peter Johnston, Taffy Raphael, Rob Tierney, Dick Allington, and Scott Paris. This was a group of reading researchers with new ideas who were looking for a state wanting to reform its reading policy, and Michigan was a state looking for assistance to help bring its reading reform into fruition. It was a perfect union.

In 1984 the idea of a new definition of reading was presented to the State Board of Education. It was rejected and flatly turned down. As a result, a committee was formed to help educators engage in dialogues and become better acquainted with the research underlying the new definition of reading and how it would have a positive change in reading instruction. This was the birth of the Curriculum Review Committee, which would stay together through the eighties and into the nineties.

The first six years things were a bit bumpy. Schools had learned how to produce high scores on the existing MEAP, and they were not interested in change. For the Curriculum Review Committee, getting educators to learn more about the new definition of reading became a mission. An early initiative was a flip chart (the first) called *New Decisions about Reading Instruction*. It described the research and the subsequent ways reading instruction would change.

When the first statewide conference was scheduled to begin on a Sunday afternoon, the State Board of Education secretary remarked, "You won't get anyone to come out on Sunday afternoon, especially for some newfangled reading idea." In fact he gave up going to a concert to come to the conference for fear his prediction would be true. He came and found that over a thousand people attended that meeting. With that kind of interest, the Curriculum Review Committee was on a roll.

Following the first statewide conference, the definition of reading and the flip chart were presented at a preconvention institute preceding the 1986 International Reading Association conference. Wisconsin took home our definition of reading and made it their own. Within a year, the literature about reading was referring to our definition as the *Wisconsin Definition of Reading*. Our flip chart went back with the Florida delegation, and with a few alterations and a new title, it became Florida's *New Directions in Reading Instruction* and was submitted to IRA for publication. MRA tried to stop the publication and gain recognition for Michigan, but it wasn't possible. For the Curriculum Review Committee the *Definition of Reading* became a battle cry, a call to action. They wrote more flip charts for secondary education, special education, for English as a second language, for content areas, and for MEAP. They created modules to make sense of research and practice and videos to teach and inspire. All of this was presented over and over again in conference after conference, even a national conference.

When the first statewide conference was scheduled ... the State Board of Education secretary remarked, "You won't get anyone to come out on Sunday afternoon, especially for some newfangled reading idea."

The number of educators supporting the reforms in reading was growing, and near the end of the decade, the State Board of Education adopted the definition and the new objectives, and by 1989 Michigan had a new reading MEAP, a new statewide reading assessment. One that models quality reading instruction. One that expects readers to be engaged and to think. Yes, one that expects the readers to keep looking while they are learning to read. One that continues to be a model for other states and for the national assessments of reading.

During the past six years while I was out of the country, I would hear reports of the overturning of the reading reforms of the eighties. These reforms in other states were being reversed by governors' decrees, state board mandates, and in some cases by legislation outlawing some instructional practices and requiring others. So in July of this year, when I returned to Michigan, I felt like the people must have felt as reported in our national anthem. After a perilous night with bombs bursting in the air, when the dawn came, they saw that the flag was still there.

Although less dramatic, but certainly as important, I was happy to see that after the ravages of the reading reforms in other states, our definition, our own victory to reform reading in Michigan, was still there. Shielded by the fortress of the MELOFF and kept safe by the stewards, Sheila Potter and Deanna Birdyshaw, today our definition is alive and functioning, echoed in the frameworks of the curriculum and resounding through the standards and benchmarks.

That's the real legacy: dedicated and persistent educators who strive for the highest quality reading instruction for students in our Michigan schools. It's you and what you did and continue to do through your professionalism as individuals and through organizations.

Let me leave you with a vision that echoes the past and joins us to the future. In 1989 after the definition of reading was securely reflected in the objectives and in the new MEAP, the Curriculum Review Committee revised John Lennon's song *Imagine* into a vision of literacy. Last night, James Barry, a first-year English teacher, recorded the song for you in the style of John Lennon. James will sing the words. You join him. You, I, and James with a little help from John Lennon will take us to the future. Imagine.