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# Invitations to Michigan Literacy: Our Visions

*Dr. W. Dorsey Hammond is a professor at Oakland University. He delivered this address at the 1999 MRA Conference on March 13.*

**J**ust 293 days from today we are going to flip all four cards on our 1999 calendar. The 9 becomes a zero, the next 9 becomes a zero, the third 9 to the left becomes a zero, and the 1 becomes a 2. That hasn't happened for a thousand years—before the Magna Carta was written, hundreds of years before Shakespeare was even born, centuries before this democracy was formed. Indeed a new millennium occurs relatively seldom and we are living to experience it.

What I would like you to do is fast-forward another 11 years from today to the year 2010—the MRA conference. I can tell you the dates for the 2010 conference, Saturday March 13—today's date if you'd like to write it in your Franklin planner.

At that conference some things will be different. There will be some of the same players, and there will be new faces as well. It is likely you will not have to take notes, thanks to a new generation of chips announced by IBM last month. Your small cell phone will pick up voice messages, store, and print them. But many things at that conference will be strikingly similar. Chances are we will be here at the Amway. Chances are many of us will have driven through snow or at least flurries to get here. Those arriving at the 2010 conference on Saturday morning March 13, 2010 will have to contend with the annual St. Patrick's day parade in getting to the hotel.

The previous winter 2009, it is likely the Detroit Lions again will have finished 7-9 or 8-8. So many things will not have changed.

The governor will either be in attendance or logging in on the MRA web page. We don't know who the governor will be, but whoever *she* is, *she* will be interested in what's happening at MRA

If that 2010 conference continues the legacy of outstanding MRA conferences, we must make significant progress in literacy education, as we have done in the past. With this in mind, I would like to suggest some issues we will need to address in the interim.

I will share briefly two considerations about this process of learning to read, three thoughts about what we as teachers need to do as a profession, and finish with a caution for your consideration.

First, I believe that beginning now we have to broaden our lens of what it means to learn to read. There is still that notion in 1999 that learning to read is something *little* kids do. It's supposed to happen in the primary grades. "First you learn to read and then you read to learn," as the saying goes. As one graduate student said to me recently, "I figured either you could



read or you couldn't. It was something you learned and then it was done." I submit that this focus is too narrow. We have to commit ourselves to the notion that learning to read is at minimum a K-12 proposition. We need to ask ourselves what does it mean to be a literate 18-year-old in the 21st century and what we are doing not just in the early grades but rather through the grades. Becoming literate is never done. Too often we hear in 6th grade or middle school or high school, "We don't teach reading. They should be able to read by the time they get to me." I can tell you that in my fifth decade I am still learning *how* to read. In reality we stop the process of teaching students how to read far too early. Such a view has substantial curriculum implications. That means we have to do a better job of selling the notion to our

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upper grade colleagues, not only to the English departments, but to the science, math, and physics teachers, that they have a very important role to play in this process. For years we have said "every teacher is a teacher of reading." That statement tends to scare and put off science, math, social studies, and even English teachers. They think we are asking them to do our job. Rather it seems to me

we have to modify our tactics and take the position that what you are already teaching is vitally important, but we reading people can share some techniques that will help your student read and enjoy science even more. We can share some methodology that will get more students to read their assignments, remember more of what they read, and be *more* willing to discuss and ask questions. We can share some methodology that will get more students to read their assignments, remember more of what they read, and be *more* willing to discuss and ask questions. These cannot be empty promises. We are going to have to stand and deliver. We will know we are succeeding when science, history, math, and more English teachers begin to attend the MRA conference.

The second issue I want to raise is the very nature of the learners themselves. We have debated long and hard in this century about the nature of the reading process. We have spent far less time looking at the nature of the individual who is doing the learning. In our reading programs we have to capitalize on what humans are predisposed to do—at birth and most assuredly when they walk through our school doors as 5- and 6-year olds—namely the human predisposition to want to make sense of their world, to figure things out, and ask why. As humans young or old we are bothered by arbitrariness and nonsense. Gordon Wells, the brilliant scholar on young children's cognitive and language behavior, makes this point so well—that children are first and foremost meaning-makers, not our meaning but their personal meanings. As he states so eloquently: "Unless bludgeoned into an unthinking form of rote learning children are active learners attempting to construe what is new in terms of what they already know."

Thus, it frankly makes little sense to me to begin the learning-to-read process exclusively or primarily with an arbitrary code out of the context of meaning and comprehension. Both phonics and comprehension are important, and one should not precede the other even for one instructional day! Each supports and facilitates the other, and both should be addressed concurrently. I suggest to you that long before the 2010 MRA conference, we will have universally come to that truth. If we have not, we will be contesting the same issues in 2010 that divide us unnecessarily today and that have plagued us for the last 50 years.

And so we need to expand our view of what it means to learn to read and to understand from the very beginning of instruction that the phonics/decoding aspects are inextricably balanced with meaning-making and vice versa.



Our friend, colleague, and scholar P. David Pearson refers to this position as the *radical middle*. It is not a position of compromise but rather a strongly held centrist view of balance.

I would like you to think with me now about two different challenges.

First, there seems to me far too much of a disconnect between reading researchers and reading practitioners. Teachers too often feel alienated from research and indeed intimidated by it. There is this notion that research is done at the university by university people.

Research is vital in our literacy profession. But just as there is a range of teaching quality in our respective schools, there is a range in the quality of research conducted in our field—some very good, some very bad, some very important, some insignificant. Who better to filter through that research than the professionals who teach in classrooms every day. Too often we shy away from theory and research—not knowing whether it is good or bad—trusting someone else, often with limited teaching experience, to tell you what and how to teach.

Again, it seems to me we have to meet in this radical middle. This change in perspective and practice will not be easy, but it is doable.

For example, reading researchers have to conduct research and report research in understandable terms so it is inviting and interesting. Researchers should collaborate more and more with practicing teachers in natural classroom settings. This is happening more and more, at least here in Michigan.

And conversely teachers and local school personnel have to begin seeing themselves as researchers. I am particularly heartened by the teacher-as-researcher concept just beginning to take hold in Michigan universities. In addition to the emotional satisfaction of seeing students learn, we need to couple that with the intellectual stimulation of asking *why, how come, what if*.

Research is not primarily about statistics; it is about asking important questions. Indeed some of our best research on reading in this century did not use complicated designs and statistics but rather asked simple and important questions. Hopefully, we will make important strides in this direction, and when you attend the 2010 conference, you will see yourselves as teacher-researchers and researcher-educators.

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The second challenge that faces our profession is that our training and study has to become more of a lifelong quest. Those of you in this room understand that. Just as learning to read is a lifelong pursuit, so too is learning how to teach.

Often when I look at my graduate classes at Oakland University, I note a sea of young faces—26-, 27-, 28-year-olds completing a master's degree. The good news is that these young educators have elected to continue their professional education at the beginning of their teaching careers. One wonders however, who will support their professional development for the next 25 years. We have to find ways to establish ongoing discourse communities and dialogue groups, study groups, research groups throughout the fabric of our literacy profession. Every teacher must engage in this dialogue. Every building principal must engage in this continuous dialogue and provide the wherewithal for it to occur. Every assistant superintendent and superintendent should insist that this dialogue be institutionalized as well as participate in it themselves. Note that we are not talking about a committee—but a *universal* sustained dialogue.

In addition web pages and the Internet will help. MRA conferences and local councils will help. I happen to think this is one of the appeals of MRA—we enjoy the sessions, but we also look forward to sitting and talking with other educators. I find in my own experience that



almost everytime I sit with a small group of educators and discuss issues, methodology, classroom practices, and theory, I learn.

American teachers do so many things so very well, but we don't converse with one another often enough on literacy issues, research, and methodologies. I know with your ingenuity and commitment that you will figure out how to make it happen to sustain serious professional development throughout our careers.

To be sure, we are going to learn some exciting new concepts about how to teach literacy in the coming years. As schema theory, metacognition, invented spelling, and emergent literacy were radical when first introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, what will be the revolutionary new ideas of this first decade of the 21st century?

We are not sure what they will be, but *one* thing we can be sure of is that there will be no *silver bullet*. We can bank on that. Without mentioning some of the new movements and ideas and research just on the horizon, we will need to filter these new notions through our own educational experiences—open to new thinking and practices, but with a healthy skepticism.

We are strongly committed to a "balanced literacy perspective" in Michigan. We do not intend to be jerked around from one literacy position to another, as some of our sister states appear to have been.

There is another side to this coin of change—not only what we will be doing new and different, but what of the old practices are we going to throw out.

Sometimes it seems we are walking through a crowded literacy market place where vendors are urging us to try this, taste this, buy this, no don't buy his, mine is better, this is just what you need, this is scientific, this is research-based, this is the latest thing available. Let me hasten to add I'm not necessarily talking about the vendors and publishing companies, but the vendors of ideas, strategies, techniques, and methodologies as well. Thus, we must show some restraint and good judgment. Our success in literacy in the coming decade will be determined as much by what we don't buy into, don't embrace,

***Our success in literacy in the coming decade will be determined as much by what we don't buy into, don't embrace, as what we do embrace.***

as what we do embrace.

School times and instructional time is relatively finite, so anything we add we probably are going to need to subtract something else. One of the most interesting questions in teaching is—*What is it that we are doing now that quite frankly is not making much difference in literacy development?* What is it in our classrooms that we are so sure we must do—absolutely—so essential; and yet if we took it out no damage would be done? I suspect there is more of this phenomenon than we realize.

And so that is my caution—no silver bullet. We'll get better not by throwing out all that we know, but by adding a dimension here, doing *less* of something else there, modifying, massaging, refining, reshaping in subtle ways.

The final challenge that faces us in the coming years is to tell our literacy story to the community at large.

As in no other period in our history, laypersons and government officials question what we do and why we do it. We should have nothing to hide about our literacy instruction. What we have learned on the Early Literacy Committee is that our brightest parents have very legitimate concerns about educational practices. The opening up of MRA to parent groups and legislators has already begun and needs to continue.



Michigan people need to see us at our best. Last year at MRA I was standing in the back of a room, packed with literacy educators at 5 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon. What struck me about that session was the commitment of teachers, on their own time, and many at their own expense, listening, learning, questioning. I believe state officials and ordinary citizens need to see that kind of professional behavior by educators in their state. We need to promote our image. When we open up our schools, our classrooms, and even our professional organizations, good things tend to happen.

And so we have some challenges ahead—from expanding our view of what it really means to learn to read and write over the long term, to closing the gaps between research and practices, to continuing to change and modify literacy practices, and to sell ourselves to the larger community.

There are other issues of course. We must continue to make progress in assessment for example. Again it should be a question of balance. We have to bridge a gap-too-large between special education and reading. We have an increasing ESL population to teach to read and write. We have to figure out how to best interface technology with reading and writing.

All of these things are doable!

Fortunately we won't have to do any of this alone. We have been particularly fortunate in this state, thanks in large measure to MRA, to draw upon the expertise of individuals outside of Michigan—from A to Z. Dick Allington and Dick Anderson to Jerry Zutell—From Camille Blackowitz and Michael Beck to Art Costa, Cooper, Calkins, Farr, Gentry, Graves, Goodman, Hoffman, Donna Ogle, Jack Pikulski, Regie Routman, Strickland, Santa, Templeton and Gordon Wells—all friends of Michigan. We value their expertise.

These interesting issues we face are fluid and subtle. We'll have to find our way. We'll take two steps forward and one back. But if history teaches us anything, it is that this state and this organization are capable of really profound, progressive, and tough tasks.

I know you will find this 99 MRA conference that Paul Booker has organized enlightening and stimulating. And if we do our job well, in the next few years the 2010 conference will be also a time of enlightenment, stimulation, and celebration.

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# A Pledge to My Students

*By Colleen M. Klein*

I promise to come prepared to teach.  
You promise to come prepared to learn.

I promise to treat you fairly and with a deep respect for your youth  
and inexperience in life and where you are going.  
You promise to respect my views  
and try to see where I am coming from.

I promise to give you my best knowledge base, styles of learning,  
and show you that learning can be fun.  
You promise to take that brick of knowledge and build a strong  
foundation for your education.

I promise to be serious about things yet  
share my sense of humor with you.  
You promise to enjoy life but  
be serious when you need to be.

I promise to realize everyone makes mistakes but  
realize when you're wrong, to right that wrong and move on.  
You promise to be patient with different views and  
to know you do not always have the right answers.

I promise to believe in you, and  
You promise to believe in yourself and follow your dreams.

I promise to always care deeply for you and hope that you will  
have a vision of your own someday.  
You promise to care about people around you, as well as  
Mother Earth, and most of all  
You promise to make a difference in this world with a  
positive effect.

*Colleen M. Klein has served as an educator for 23 years. She is a member of  
the Kent County Council of MRA.*