
May 1969

Dilemmas and Disagreements in Reading

William K. Durr

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

Recommended Citation

Durr, William K. (1969) "Dilemmas and Disagreements in Reading," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol3/iss2/3>

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

DILEMMAS AND DISAGREEMENTS IN READING

by William K. Durr

Despite thousands of research studies on reading instruction and tons of commercially prepared materials to advance the elusive skills of reading, elementary teachers are still plagued with dilemmas involving word attack and comprehension. The wide range of disagreements about how to resolve these dilemmas often seem to compound the difficulties instead of alleviating them.

The suggestions given for promoting word attack skills cover a wide spectrum. "Don't teach any phonics until the children have memorized a number of sight words." "Start by memorizing phrases like, 'The fat cat bats the rat,' and the child will discover the letter sounds." "It doesn't matter *how* you start, providing you wait until the middle of first grade." "It doesn't matter *when* you start, providing you start with the sounds of the vowels."

There is no easy solution, no magic pill, to make all young children vociferous readers, but we are more likely to achieve our goals if we visualize word attack skills on a continuum. True, each point is not necessarily passed before the next is begun, but understanding the general progression can help us determine what a child must master as he continues and can also help us pinpoint specific weaknesses for older children who have failed to master word attack.

First, the child must be able to distinguish between phonemes, the small, oral differences between words. If he cannot hear the differences between the oral words *hat* and *bat* he will not learn the sounds that either the letter *h* or the letter *b* usually stands for.

Second, the child must be able to distinguish between the graphemes, the printed forms of the letters. For, if the words *hat* and *bat* look the same to him, he will, again, not learn to associate the correct sounds for *h* and *b*.

Third, the child who has learned to hear differences between phonemes and see differences between graphemes is now ready to learn the various sounds that letters represent and to use these sounds as an aid in unlocking words which he has never seen before. Early emphasis should be on the sounds of the consonants rather than the sounds of the vowels for two reasons. The consonants are more regular so the reader does not have to guess which of several possible sounds each letter may represent. The consonants are also more helpful in unlocking words in context. To verify this, write two sentences, one in which all of the vowels have been left out and one in which all of the consonants have been left out. See for yourself which is easier to read.

Fourth, the child should be taught the phoneme-grapheme relationships for the most common consonant digraphs. The most commonly taught are *sh*, *ch*, *th*, and *wh*; however, the teacher

may want to determine for herself which ones need to be taught in terms of their use in the reading materials the child will meet at first.

Fifth, the child should be taught to use context together with letter sounds to aid in unlocking words. The context, the sense of what he is reading, will make it unnecessary for him to puzzle-out each new word he meets through letter sounds alone. It will also aid him by developing the habit, from the very beginning, of looking for sense in everything that he reads. A strong emphasis on context, then, will simplify word attack and promote comprehension.

Sixth, after the child has mastered the basic consonant sounds and learned to use them with context as he reads, he is ready to learn the long and short sounds of the vowels. Sometimes, not always, the reader does need to apply a knowledge of vowel sounds to unlock words. Although the child can learn and should be taught to use consonants plus context before he begins to read, he can learn to generalize to vowel sounds from known words after he has already started reading.

Seventh, the child needs to be taught the sounds which various vowel combinations such as *oa*, *oo*, and *ie* usually represent. The child will be on more solid ground if we teach him the most common sounds for such letter groupings rather than to teach the "two-vowels-go-walking" rule. Research has proven this rule undependable. It frequently gets in the child's way rather than helping him.

Eighth, and this may be started at any of several levels, the child can profit from instruction in consonant blends such as *bl*, *str*, and *fr*. Although he may be able to generalize to these for himself from the sounds of the individual letters which he already knows, some blends appear frequently enough so that instruction in them will prove helpful.

Ninth, the child needs to learn the sounds that certain common syllables usually stand for. For example, *com*, *per*, and *ing* are combinations of letters which appear frequently enough to warrant special instruction.

Obviously, merely providing instruction in these items does not insure their effective use by a child. The child must also have practice in each of these to insure that any learnings have been fixed and become an automatic response for him. He must also receive help in applying these learnings in his day-by-day reading situations. For example, knowledge of the sound that the letter *m* usually stands for does not insure that the child will be able to use this knowledge without our help in the initial stages of application.

Each step, then, requires teaching, practicing, and applying. But the child who has been taken fully through these steps will be able to figure out for himself any new printed word which he would know and understand if someone said it to him.

The ability to unlock words, although an essential for successful reading, is still only one small step on the path to becoming a mature reader. Another concern is whether the child can

learn to understand the sentences and paragraphs in which he can read each of the words.

Here, too, there are disagreements. It is sometimes contended that the child does not really need instruction in comprehending what he reads—if he can decode each of the words he will comprehend it. Most of those who have worked with elementary children realize that this is not necessarily true. Others contend that aid in comprehension is essential, but fail to translate this belief into teaching. Children are merely exhorted to comprehend rather than taught. For example, some materials tell the child how important it is to pick the topic of a paragraph. Then, after a long discourse on the importance of this ability, the child is told to read a selection and get the topic of each paragraph without ever being told *how* he can most effectively do this.

There are many ways we can help children develop comprehension abilities; however, unlike word attack skills, these do not always follow a sequential series of steps for introduction. Instead, we may teach the same skills at several grade levels but teach them with increasingly complex reading materials each time to lead the child to higher levels of maturity.

We may help a child comprehend more effectively by teaching him the meanings and uses of punctuation marks and typographical aids. For example, we can help the child see that in the sentence, "John had chocolate fudge cake and milk for his birthday," the number of commas which are added will determine whether John had two, three, or four things for his birthday. Or,

for example, we can help the child see how an author, unable to give an oral emphasis to certain words, can provide this emphasis in print through the use of italics and boldface type.

Have you ever had a child read a paragraph in which he knew all of the words but, upon completing it, found that he did not know what the paragraph was about? A child will not automatically acquire the ability to determine the topic of a paragraph, but he can be taught to do so. For initial instruction, select simple paragraphs in which all of the sentences are about one thing. Take the child through such paragraphs one sentence at a time asking what each sentence is about. Then explain that the one thing all of the sentences in a paragraph are about is called the topic of that paragraph. At higher levels, the child can be helped through more complex paragraphs in the same way so he learns that a paragraph may have a topic even though every single sentence in that paragraph is not about the same thing.

Once a child is able to select the topic of a paragraph, he is ready to be taught how to outline a paragraph and, later, longer selections. Teaching simple outlining can help a child see how the sentences in a paragraph relate to each other—how details relate to subtopics, how subtopics relate to main topics, and how main topics relate to titles. An understanding of such relationships can be a valuable aid to the child as he reads and strives to understand other materials.

There are many factors which help or hinder successful reading ability apart from sound

instruction in reading skills. The general background of experiences that the child brings to us and his emotional, social, and physical development at the time we are working with him are some of the factors which play a part in his reading success. But we should not expect the child to attain his maximum growth in reading unless we also provide a sound, sequential program of skills. Our instruction in word attack and comprehension will help determine the child's success or failure in reading.

(Doctor Durr is Professor of Education at Michigan State University.)

(Continued from Page 31)

is much to learn and much effort demanded from teacher and children alike.

Indeed, the words of the NSSE Committee on Reading are still relevant. "Our greatest opportunity in teaching reading lies in an intelligent attack upon the problems in content reading."

¹Chase, Francis S., "In the Next Decade," *CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN READING AND PROMISING SOLUTIONS*, Supplementary Educational Monograph, Number 91, December, 1961, pp. 10-11.

²National Society for the Study of Education, *READING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL*, Thirty-seventh Yearbook of the NSSE, Chicago, 1938.

³Hall, DeForest and Hatch, Roy W., *THE EASTERN HEMISPHERE*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1953, p. 326.

(Doctor Fay is Professor of Education at Indiana University.)

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION MICHIGAN READING ASSOCIATION

Name -----
 Address -----
 City ----- State ----- Zip -----
 Position ----- Phone -----
 School ----- School Address -----
 City ----- State ----- Zip -----*

MEMBERSHIP YEAR 1969-70 — Check One
 MRA Dues: \$2.00 - New Member - Renewal - Check # -----

MAIL TO: Sybil Michener, Treasurer *Required for mailing
 Michigan Reading Association MRA Journal
 P.O. Box 665
 Flint, Michigan
