



Reading: The Last Civil Right

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Several years ago at a national conference, I had the privilege of hearing Phyllis Hunter deliver a powerful speech about the national crisis in reading. At the end of the talk approximately 1000 people in the audience bounded to their feet in a heartfelt standing ovation. For the first time I heard someone say in a public forum that which I have felt for many years: that learning to read still eludes too many children and adults...it is their last civil right. As a society, we have ameliorated some of the sins associated with the denial of other civil rights like race (albeit with great difficulty and with various levels of success), but until we make sure that everyone is taught to read the way THEY learn, we will have failed in the Civil Rights Movement. We DO know how to do this...but we are not doing it.

“We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children to read. We already have reams of research, hundreds of successful programs, and thousands of effective schools to show us the way. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far.”

Elaine McEwan, 1998

We have unintentionally withheld from approximately one third of our children (up to over 60% in impoverished areas) that key to the future and the key to the feeling of self worth: the ability to read. The sad truth is that many people in responsible positions do not realize this.

The worst part of this situation is that it is not necessary. This loss of potential and this terrible cause of children and adults feeling “LSD...lazy, stupid, and dumb” is reversible and preventable because we do know how to teach at least 95% of children to read at their cognitive level. Many may find this hard to believe, but it is true. We have both the personal experiences and the data to substantiate this. Some say with regard to teaching children to read: “We have the skill, not the will.”

Many people whom I meet on planes, at social events, in the grocery store, etc. are shocked and amazed to hear that we do indeed know how to teach the vast majority of children to read fluently.

They can hardly believe it. The “person in the street” generally thinks that the high rate of reading failure in this country is due to the teachers not knowing how to teach and reach all

children or that it is the fault of the student or parent. Some blame the student for “not trying” or “not being motivated”. Some claim that parents ignore their child’s difficulties. Now, outside the workshop venue, I can provide documentation and share my own first hand experiences to explain what I see as the causes and parents and children begin to understand.

About the Stories

For 35 years my work has revolved around children and adults who have struggled in life with something that is learned with relative ease by most others...learning to read. Importantly, I am not simply talking about “special ed” students. The national crisis in literacy is broader – it is a general education issue and can relate to all of us.

Throughout these years I have had opportunities to view this issue and understand how we fail so many children from many different vantage points...as teacher, tutor, learning specialist, diagnostician, policy worker, parent counselor, school board member, community member, higher education instructor, consultant, professional developer for state and federal reading initiatives and admissions director at a school that specializes in reading problems. In these roles, I have heard far too many stories of failure and frustration from the parents, teachers, colleagues, and the struggling readers themselves (of all ages). These stories are tattooed on my brain. I cannot forget them.

The details vary, but the themes of the stories of struggling readers are the same:

- early differences in learning the alphabet or in language development
- learning to spell or read in ways that were marked by inconsistencies or difficulties
- possession of special abilities and intact areas of learning
- high levels of frustration and angst in spite of varied and numerous attempts at remediation
- confusion and misunderstanding between school and parents
- spurts of “improvement” to make teachers and parents wonder about the reality of “the problem”

And, the most serious themes:

- the scars on the child and the feelings of inadequacy that last a lifetime
- the loss of untold potential for themselves and for society

These stories are told to almost any willing listener because the teacher or the parent involved is so eager to share the story because he or she is so baffled by the inconsistencies and senselessness of the problem. They seek advice and a listening ear. It is counterintuitive that a bright, intact child who has been read to daily and is receiving a “good education” does not learn to read and spell like the other children.

Why, when well-meaning teachers and parents work very hard (often with limited resources of time, training, and technology) and do their best to help a child learn to read... why doesn’t the child learn, they ask. The answer to that is much too long to include in this article. But the good news is that some (though far too few) struggling readers have learned to read well.

If one follows these situations, one learns that the path toward finally finding the “missing piece” looks something like this: First of all, teachers and/or parents explore the situation and find out

what they might not have known or understood about reading and this particular child's journey. This is an often overlooked, but critical step. Before one can "fix something", one has to know what is "broken" and often people don't know what they don't know about reading, through no fault of their own. Thus, this may be the very hardest step. Well-meaning, smart people may not have updated information and knowledge about reading instruction since some of this is relatively new. They may think that the child was taught in the manner in which he or she learned, but if that were true, the child would have learned.

Second, once teachers and/or parents are armed with that current knowledge and understanding and some resources, they usually break down many barriers to deliver the service....relentlessly.

Some examples of interventions that change the course for struggling readers:

Current assessment tools can pinpoint exactly what requisite skills for reading are missing or under- developed in a particular child, based on recent research. Assessment can often be done quickly if the appropriate instrument is used by well-trained teachers or others. It does not necessarily involve a long diagnostic evaluation, but does involve instruments that indicate benchmarks for a child in a particular grade at a particular time of year. The assessments should mark progress in the five components of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) and the very foundation of reading: oral language development.

Many reading problems are misunderstood. For example, sometimes a reading problem looks like a "comprehension" problem, when, in fact, it is due to poor automaticity at the word or phrase level, thus reading is not fluent. This is often the root of the "comprehension" problem. Marilyn Adams, well- known researcher and reading expert has said, "In fact, the automaticity with which skillful readers recognize words is the key to the whole system. The reader's attention can be focused on the meaning and message of a text only to the extent that it's free from fussing with the words and letters."

1. Once the proper assessments are administered, small group differentiated instruction in these five areas of reading (plus oral language) is provided. The intensity and duration of instruction is often underestimated; monitoring the progress carefully, using the proper assessments, is central.

Teachers often find it extremely challenging to provide learning environments that offer differentiated small group instruction. Managing several different groups and providing the right instruction can be a daunting task. A child may be strong in one area and weak in another, thus the "balance" in a "balanced reading program" must be tilted for individual children. For instance, a child may require intense and very individualized instruction for a few months in something like phonemic awareness, but not in vocabulary at that particular time. In addition, certain types of reading programs are more suited to struggling readers than others. Allowing the data to drive the instruction clarifies this challenge.

2. Working together as a school with adequate professional development and strong leadership makes the critical difference so that the following aspects of instruction can be facilitated:

Scaffolding (i.e. providing the amount and the appropriate kind of support for a given child)

Multisensory instruction is the way that many people learn certain things and is not negotiable.

A scope and sequence for teaching with a plan for instruction for each of the five components of reading. Different learners move through these in unique ways; intense,

individualized instruction is often needed for many more children than is typically expected.

Structure, structure, structure

Curriculum materials that are scientifically research-based and proven to be successful

Professional development for administrators, teachers, specialists, paraprofessionals

Parent involvement

Schedules that allow for a two hour uninterrupted language arts block and collaboration

Technology that can be individualized and linked with the instruction.

“Collective responsibility” is a critical component. General education, special education, and Title 1 personnel can discuss their resources, share children and personnel, work together as they evaluate the data and drive the instruction for each learner so that the children at risk receive consistent research-based instruction and interventions from all of the teachers with whom they work.

Finally, if we DO indeed know how to teach reading, why aren't we doing it???

Professor Emerita at Harvard Graduate School of Education, Dr. Jeanne Chall, and others have written about the complex and often surprising reasons for the achievement gap and the widespread reading failure. The reasons are often about factors other than disagreements about how to teach reading. They are multifaceted, extremely complex and beyond the scope of this article. But there is one major factor that is commonly discussed. That is the dire need for increased professional development for teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators with regard to recent reading research. Very often what we know about the teaching of reading has not filtered down to an individual because the professional development needs far exceed school budgets, time for adult learning and an adequate number of qualified professional development providers.

After learning more about the reading process and the teaching of struggling readers, teachers tell me everywhere I go, no matter what state or town, that they didn't know what they didn't know about reading. They have worked extremely hard and knew something was missing, but didn't know what it was. It is often not their fault. Why would they know? They often have not been given adequate opportunities to learn the most current knowledge about reading instruction. In the professional development I do, I meet scores of teachers who are amazed at how much has been learned in recent years about the reading process that they never learned. Sped teachers, reading teachers, classroom teachers are often frustrated that the opportunities for learning the latest research about reading instruction are so limited.

Thus, many times the children who struggle in learning to read are often exposed to different approaches every year or painful homework sessions with well-meaning parents grasping at straws, trying to find “what works”. During this process, the children often feel even more inadequate saying something like, “Gee, if all of these people are working THIS hard to teach me and I still can't read, I MUST be stupid.”

What exacerbates the situation is that sometimes, the small gains that are made are so encouraging and exciting that progress seems better than it really is. In fact, the gains are often not sustained over time or still leave the child with reading skills that are scattered and incomplete.... the “Swiss Cheese Effect”. This is especially common with some of the children who struggle with reading who are very, very intelligent and have compensated so well that they “look” like they are reading better than they really are. If they are reading “on grade level”, it is

not reflective of their potential because they have above grade level potential. Thus, sometimes reaching “grade level” should not be reason to think that their problem is solved.

Unless the gains a child has made are those that show steady growth on an upward trajectory using valid and reliable assessment instruments specifically targeted at those sub skills determined to be critical to reading, we have to keep working to find the methods that work for that child. Dynamic assessment (assessment that can measure incremental growth as it happens “dynamically”) is key. We cannot wait until the end of the year or just once a year to see if what we are doing is “working”. We have to be sure we are assessing the right components of reading throughout the year, monitoring the progress and altering instruction accordingly, as the child’s reading sub skills are improving.

We do know what works. We know more about how the brain processes the sub skills of reading and how these neural systems work together than at any time in the history of the world. The work of Sally Shaywitz has been a major contribution to the field of reading in terms of the brain’s processing of print.

We have 35 years of NIH longitudinal studies and now data is coming in from the Reading First schools in the country that were allotted the resources to actually operationalize the tenets about assessment, instruction, and professional development that we know work.

Reading failure creeps in and quietly does its damage. It is a confusing, silent, insidious disabler. Children can “look good” one year, because the particular method used may be what he or she needs, and not so good the next year. This is not a special education problem. In fact, it is a general education problem. There are simple ways of preventing and identifying reading failure early on so that we don’t have to resort to sending the children who struggle to special education.

The children in middle school and high school who are still struggling with either the decoding and word identification OR the comprehension parts of reading need even more specialized instructors and scheduling.

Their needs are more complex since the years of failure and “false starts” have taken their toll emotionally. Sometimes these children only see themselves as “failures” or they have given up...and then they act out. So then, they are sometimes blamed for “not trying” .

Heroes and Other Hallmarks of Success Stories Regarding Struggling Readers:

Sometimes teachers go to their administrators and ask to alter schedules so that appropriate instruction can be given. They also purchase materials and programs with their own money and go to Saturday and evening workshops and extra training sessions. Some teachers even donate their time to extend the learning time with the child.

Some parents become reading experts by spending years studying reading, going to conferences, buying books, spending evenings on the web, and even by returning to school. I have seen these situations hundreds of times over the years. These parents and teachers have “saved” the child.

Some of these children, once grown, tell me this kind of story over and over and over with the greatest respect and awe for their “savior”, be it a parent or a favorite teacher. That person has changed a life. For each of these children learning to read, breaking down that barrier was the last civil right. Until groups of people and education, in general, have caught up with the amazing knowledge base we now have regarding reading, we must depend on individuals or a school by school commitment. We need a full scale national effort to teach reading so that learning to read is successful ...it is everyone’s civil right.

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**Some facts from the
National Reading Panel and
National Assessment of Educational Progress**

International comparisons of reading performance placed American eleventh graders very close to the bottom, behind students from the Philippines, Indonesia, Brazil and other developing nations.

There are approximately 8.7 million fourth through twelfth graders in America whose chances for academic success are dismal because they are unable to read and comprehend the material in their textbooks.

Only 70 percent of the children who enter eighth grade actually graduate from high school, and in many urban areas, only 50 percent of students will receive a high school diploma.

High knowledge third graders have vocabularies about equal to the lowest performing 12th graders.

Linguistically “poor” first graders know 5000 words, linguistically “rich” first graders know 20,000 words

AND once established, such differences can be difficult to ameliorate.

The most recent NAEP exams show that 25 percent of eighth graders and 26 percent of twelfth graders in our country were reading at “below basic” levels in 2002.