Early childhood experiences influencing reading achievement

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

INFLUENCING READING ACHIEVEMENT

by

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CHAPTER I
THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Reading is a process of interpreting symbols, and these symbols are far removed from a child's actual experience. In the home, when a child observes actions like combing hair or tying shoes -- he can imitate these actions. The actual process of reading cannot be imitated.

Almy states that:

an environment that provides the child with many opportunities for varied sensory and motor experiences is essential. So, too, is the presence of people who talk with (not merely at) the child, people who read and write and who share these activities with children.1

It is hoped that the child's reading teachers, namely clinicians, teachers and parents, realize the grave responsibility that is theirs. The clinician or teacher should guide the parents in order to make them aware that the kind of home which will surely produce the child with high motivation towards success in reading is that home where the child is part of the family circle, where activities are planned with the child in mind, where books, magazines,

and newspapers are loved and read and where fun with words
is a family habit.  

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this investigation was to review the
literature pertinent to those affective aspects of child-
hood experiences relative to reading at the primary level.
The role of parents—their cultural, emotional, intellectual
and social influences—as the first teachers of reading was
discussed. In addition, the roles of clinicians and teachers
of reading were reviewed and deemed of utmost importance in
initiating a successful reading program.

Significance of the Study

It is the writer's belief that today more than ever
there is a tremendous need to meet the child at his present
level. In order to do this effectively, it is important for
the clinician and/or teacher to recognize and understand the
child's experiential background, to help him expand his
experiences concretely or vicariously, and to help him
realize that reading is one of his most important life
experiences.  

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1 Dorothy Reed Roberson, "Parents and Teachers:
Partners in the Teaching of Reading," The Reading Teacher,

2 Dorothy M. Dietrich, "Challenges in Reading,"
Because of or even sometimes in spite of the environmental situation, a child enters school with accumulations of experience. Ward maintains that "the years before a child reads are replete with the impact of environmental experiences which present him to the reading teacher with certain skills, concepts, feelings, and knowledge which form the pre-reading base from which she will need to build." ¹ It was, therefore, from this base that the ensuing success or failure of reading achievement was noted.

**Limitations**

The research studies pertinent to this investigation included the more recent ones, that is, from 1965 to the present day. The influential factors as determinants of reading success or failure were limited to the cultural, emotional, intellectual and social influences.

**Summary**

Early childhood experiences set the stage for motivating learning to read. As the child learns to obtain ideas from the spoken word, he is preparing to gain ideas from the printed word. Success in this depends in part upon the pre-reading activities experienced in the home. These experiences stem from cultural, emotional, intellectual and social influences.

CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

Environmental Influences

Reading is interpreted as "the ability of a child to draw from ideas and experiences--his and those of others--which have been put into written or printed form and to reproduce these in ways which satisfy the listener that he comprehends and can utilize those ideas."\(^1\)

Among the major factors contributing to reading success are sufficient mental age, understanding of language, background of experience, social and emotional development, and maturation in the areas directly related to word recognition. No one particular factor can be said to be the contributing factor toward reading success or failure. The factors enumerated are interdependent and all-encompassing in their influence.

Larrick states that from birth the child is growing physically, emotionally, socially and mentally and as he grows he is learning. With the acquisition of physical skill, a child is learning to communicate with others.


-4-
While he is growing physically and socially, he is also developing his mental ability. These areas of development are interrelated and interdependent.¹

The factors considered in this work are by no means exclusive ones, rather, they are the usual major determinants in reading achievement.

**Cultural Influences**

Performance on pre-reading discrimination tasks is closely associated with the socio-economic background of beginning first grade children. In the pre-school years, the developing child acquires a complex set of learnings based on discrimination, perception, transposition, and generalizations. These acquired concepts act as crucial links between the environment and the individual, and along with a set of appropriate behaviors later become a more or less fixed way of doing things.²

If the pre-school years have been lacking in the normal home and family experiences, the children will lack many prerequisites for reading. Included among these are self-confidence, satisfactory speaking and listening abilities, concept formation, good auditory and visual perception, acquaintance with the environment beyond the immediate


neighborhood, a normal span of attention, good relationships to adults, and a sense of organization. A child deficient in any of these areas is not necessarily mentally retarded but rather culturally retarded.¹

Culturally deprived children have limited experiences and very often inadequate language backgrounds. This deprivation may produce many of the physical factors which affect reading achievement. These and other cultural factors such as bilingualism, differentiation in behavioral standards, and mobility tend to produce learning problems.² On the other hand, as Hansen noted, "to feel that a good occupation and a high income alone will insure enriching literary experiences for children is for the parent to mislead himself—it matters more what parents do in the environment and with the environment.”³

Thomas maintains that the deprived child is a physical child first, then he is a social child and an emotional child—certainly not an intellectual child; consequently, a strict academic approach will not be a viable


educational experience for such a child. It is important for the disadvantaged child to become perceptive in the sphere of feelings and human relations and to differentiate between people in terms of what to expect from whom. This knowledge is crucial for remedying the deficits of his early years.

Grotberg stated that the two major variations in the kinds of learning experienced by the child are determined by the cultural tradition of the family and by its socio-economic level.

Parents provide educational experiences for their children by example, provision of objects and materials, reactions to their children's behavior, encouragement or disapproval, interaction, guidance, motivation, and in numerous other ways in their daily encounters.

The Early Childhood Center has a program designed to initiate the children into many different kinds of experiences:


2Edith H. Grotberg, "Role of the Parent in Fostering Early Learning," Education, LXXXIX (September, 1968), 35.

3Ibid.
experiences that, on the sensory level, sensitize them to seeing, feeling, tasting, hearing, and discriminating elements of the environment; experiences that, on the motor level, widen their knowledge of the physical world through which their own activity in it—strenuous activity such as climbing, stacking, riding, and steering, and also manipulative activity such as filling pails with pebbles or cutting with scissors; and experiences that, on a symbolic level, develop their representational functioning through painting, building with blocks, dressing up, playing at cooking supper, or pretending that it is moving day.¹

These experiences supplement those provided within the home environment, and in many cases supply for their lack.

In addition, the language experience background has a definite bearing on the degree of success or failure in beginning reading. King noted that an important step in preparing for reading and in interpreting printed language is to develop the ability to use and interpret oral language.² One explanation for the language difficulties of such culturally deprived children holds that their seemingly non-standard modes of expression are standard to them, in as much as they are characteristic of their environment.³


2Ethel M. King, "Beginning Reading: When and How," The Reading Teacher, XXII (March 1969), 553.

Emotional Influences

More and more teachers are beginning to realize the significance of the relationship between social and emotional factors and reading achievement.¹

The environment, important as it is, cannot be considered apart from the child. The whole child represents "a composite organism, the physical, emotional, and social self that learns through a variety of processes, cognitive learning being only one important component and one which also involves feelings and emotions."²

In the course of determining whether the emotional factor is the cause or the effect of the reading disability, a difficulty arises. Emotional disturbances vary in nature, degree and complexity. "Even when an emotional problem has been identified and seems to have a causal relationship to the reading difficulty, one must remember that there are other children with similar emotional problems who read well."³


³Albert J. Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability, (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1970), 266.
The emotional influences affecting reading achievement are resultant of a variety of causes, among which are "inadequate prenatal care, birth defects, lack of proper nutritional needs and inappropriate infant care."\(^1\) Children experiencing these conditions do not learn to learn because their speech, concepts, and motivation to learn are at a low level. In addition, their "normal aggression is not directed into socially constructive channels, and they have little help in dealing with emotional problems."\(^2\)

The different kinds of emotional problems affecting the ability to learn to read as enumerated by Harris include:

1. Conscious refusal to learn resulting from a conflict between cultural values of teacher and pupil;

2. Overt hostility in which self control is hard to maintain because the child has built up intense feelings of resentment;

3. Negative conditioning to reading due to the child's being introduced to reading by someone whom he feared or disliked;

4. Displacement of hostility as a result of jealousy of an older brother or sister who reads well;


\(^2\)Ibid., p. 46-47.
5. Resistance to pressure stemming from over-anxiety on the part of parents in intellectual pursuits;

6. Clinging to dependency in the overprotected child who fears learning to read may mean he must become self-reliant;

7. Quick discouragement resulting from feelings of inferiority and insecurity;

8. The Success-is-dangerous attitude in which, for such a child, reading success symbolizes entering into an adult activity, thus an attempt to compete as a rival with a parent;

9. Extreme distractibility or restlessness due to a high degree of tension; and

10. Absorption in a private world to such a degree that only intermittent attention can be given to the present environment with the inability to devote sustained attention necessary in learning to read.¹

Intellectual Influences

Intelligence, related as it is to a certain degree to success in reading, in its mental capacity can be likened to a seed which grows and unfolds and is the result of a constant interaction between the child's capabilities and

¹Harris, How to Increase Reading Ability, pp. 266-68.
the opportunities presented by the environment.¹

Some children, utilizing an exceptional quality of mind, can organize and note relationships between things they see, hear, taste and feel. This quality affects their response to their environment. Where one child would make good use of a meager environment, another would gain little from a rich environment. The question, What is intelligence? has been answered by a number of definitions. In terms relevant to reading and its affective relationship to achievement in reading, intelligence can be defined as "the overall general organizing factor involving the ability to remember relevant parts of one's past experiences, group these into concepts and patterns, and discover the underlying rule or principles."²

In his article "Teaching Reading Tomorrow," Gates stated: "to promote reading and other language arts, we should take vigorous steps to provide more sagacious management of children during the period the late Leta Hollingworth called 'The Golden Age of the Intellect', the years from 1 to 7, when intellectual eagerness and capacity for learning


²Ibid., p. 82.
are sharpest and purest."

Lavatelli says that "mental structures develop from infancy as the result of encounters with the environment." Contrarily, in Piaget's theory, it is "the intrinsic need to exercise the assimilation-accommodation processes for the purpose of developing cognitive structures for dealing with the environment." It is, therefore, of critical importance to provide experiences to stimulate intellectual growth during the early childhood years.

Social Influences

The most important single factor in later success in reading is social by nature; that is, it is to be a member of a reading family. Those areas which promote the development of verbalization and socialization are essential to verbal development which in turn is of great importance to reading development. Therefore, "the mother who talks to her newborn is laying a good foundation for reading."  


Reading affects social relations and is closely associated with social prestige. It is one of our principal means of communication. The inability to use this tool, reading, often results in interference with a person's social adjustment.\(^1\) Here, as was also noted in the consideration of emotional influences, there can be seen a circular reaction. It is not always possible to determine whether poor social adjustment is the cause or the effect of reading failure.\(^2\) In addition to this, the social factors influencing reading success or failure are closely allied to maturation which is determined by the intellectual ability of the child. Undoubtedly, among the influential factors, there is a definite interrelatedness.

The influences that are social by nature can be carried to the extreme. The creation of a sociopath, to cite an extreme case, can be the over-zealous attempt on the part of parents for their child's social success—a direct consequence of which would be a resentful attitude toward authority figures such as the teacher, thus setting up an unfavorable pupil-teacher relationship with little or no learning taking place.\(^3\)

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\(^3\)Ibid.
Crandall contends that "a child's parents are usually considered the major socializing agents influencing and molding his attitudes and behaviors."¹ These attitudes are subsequently brought to the reading process and affect achievement accordingly.

**Research Studies of Influential Factors**

The major deterrent to research in reading is the inefficiency of techniques in the investigation. Robinson suggests that "a wealth of information about processes could be secured from carefully planned... examination of children's reading behavior."²

In their book, *The First R*, the authors suggest that a preventive rather than a corrective attitude prevail. Among the recommendations set forth as a result of the reluctance of many teachers and administrators to accept the findings of sound research that relate to the methods of teaching reading, they note the following ones as being particularly pertinent:

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that the use of chronological age as an exclusive criterion for admission to kindergarten and/or first grade be re-examined and that other factors, including mental, anatomical, and social maturity, be considered. That school systems conduct experimental research programs to re-examine and re-evaluate the content of existing pre-reading activities in an effort to determine the relation of these activities to future reading success.

That no single method of instruction in beginning reading be advocated but that a variety of approaches be utilized and that these be adjusted to the competencies and needs of the individual children, and that research studies be initiated to determine the interrelationship of personality, socio-economic backgrounds, ability, and the various approaches to teaching reading, particularly at the initial stages of reading instruction.¹

Child development research made significant contributions to the development of good programs for preschool children. Research studies in general environmental enrichment demonstrated repeatedly that early learning experiences were valuable in facilitating certain aspects of the child's growth, particularly with disadvantaged children. These studies, conducted in the early 40's, laid the foundation of a strategy for applying research to education. Later, the relationship between research and childhood education was very different. A new impetus developed, and practitioners and researchers collaborated once again. This impetus became one of the many outgrowths of the vast social movement.

that hit upon early learning as having particular significance for disadvantaged children.¹

That cultural factors do influence achievement in reading to a significant degree was verified by Crandall who reported that "both children's achievement motivations and their achievement performances have been found to be significantly associated with their racial, religious, and ethnic backgrounds."²

A pilot study was conducted in view of identifying reading difficulties due to constitutional factors or developmental lag among first grade children in a school attended by a culturally disadvantaged population. The study was undertaken as action research. It was planned that help would be given to the teachers of the first grade children by expanding their background of information about six year old children, by heightening their observational abilities and by assisting them to develop materials for meeting specific needs.

The subjects included in the study were fifty-four per cent Negro, forty-two per cent Spanish-speaking, and four per cent white. There were forty-one first grade classes under study. At the outset, no significant types


of reading difficulties could be determined because emotional and social factors were present and in almost every case complicated the diagnosis.\(^1\)

A study conducted by Zigler and Butterfield indicated that due to specific types of intervention programs, significant improvement in intelligence test performance ensued. The experimenters suggested that the deprived child's general level of competence should not be equated with his level of cognitive ability. They further suggested that the deprived child's basic problem was an intellectual deficit stemming from an emotional and motivational deficit, and that though there was no increase in rate of formal cognitive development there was an improvement in the use of intelligence in a standard testing situation.\(^2\)

From the above two studies, it can be noted that cultural influences may have basic reactions towards reading achievement but these are not exclusive influences.

In a recent study, Harris concluded "it seems

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evident that without special preparation low socio-economic children cannot be expected to perform adequately in acquiring or retaining words on learning tasks.¹

"Most reading authorities agree that a child's general intellectual ability is an important ingredient of successful reading."² With reference to this, Mortenson, at the conclusion of his experiment, stated that though intelligence appears not to be a factor influencing performance of beginning first grade children on pre-reading discrimination tasks, the level of intelligence cannot be ruled out as an important element in learning to read.³

Scott, in a recent study, found a high correlation between the Metropolitan Readiness Test and a perception test (Seriation Test of 1966), both of which were administered to a group of children. He discovered that children exercise greater comprehension in reading if they have a rich fund of relevant perceptual experiences from which to draw. They are then better able to recall images internally, without having to resort to direct sensory clues. The most obvious

¹Larry A. Harris, "Interest and the Initial Acquisition of Words," The Reading Teacher, XXII (January, 1969), 362.


³Paul W. Mortenson, "Selected Pre-Reading Tasks, Socio-economic Status, and Sex; Visual and Auditory Discrimination," The Reading Teacher, XXII (October, 1968), 49.
conclusion arrived at was that perception and language are highly interactive cognitive processes influencing the general intellectual development of children.¹

The use of an intelligence test as a predictor of reading achievement is to be challenged for three reasons; (1) severe reading disabilities occur at all intellectual levels; (2) an intelligence quotient represents a global rather than a differentiated evaluation of a child's potential; and (3) the I.Q. does not account for perceptual factors which appear significant in reading success and failure.² Similarly, Roswell and Natchez contend that "intelligence is a determinant of reading achievement, but intelligence test scores do not necessarily predict the level of reading achievement."³

According to studies made among children of higher socio-economic status there exists a relationship between social behavior and the level of language development.⁴ In one of the studies "both superior language development


⁴Murphy, "Children Under Three. . .," p. 49.
and superior social and emotional development have been found to reflect the quality of family interaction. In Fite's study, quoted above, social and emotional factors also were team determinants.

Wells investigated the preschool play experiences of selected achievers and underachievers in reading to determine any significant difference in these activities. The children selected for the experiment were similar in intelligence, socio-economic status, emotional environment and family size. Results indicated that social factors were not significant ones regarding reading achievement. Conversely, social influences can favorably affect reading achievement. When not present from the home environment, supplemental influences of a social nature can be found in teacher-personality. Miller stated that "home prereading experiences were found to be related to children's reading readiness attainment but not to first-grade reading achievement, possibly because of the influences of teacher personality and skill."
CHAPTER III
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary of Important Findings

Experiential background as a prerequisite in successful achievement in reading was found to be undoubtedly important. Similarly, the degree and complexity of the influential factors, for the most part, paralleled the degree of success in the attainment of the goal. However, in the research studies reviewed in the preceding chapter, the writer noted that pupil-teacher relationship favorably affected reading achievement, in spite of a notable lack of experiential background. It must also be noted that though Crandall's study and the team study of Fite and Schwartz have related cultural influences to reading achievement to a significant degree, there is still reason to believe that a third factor can and, in fact, does counteract the deficiency, namely the provision of vicarious experience by the teacher of reading or by the clinician.

When the question of innate ability and the reaction of the background influences upon innate ability was posed, the subject was viewed in a different light. Zigler and Butterfield qualified such an influence as having basic
reactions upon the end result without necessarily acting as an exclusive influence.

The emotional influences, unlike the cultural and social influences which can be perceived as determinants and the intellectual influences which can be measured to some degree, cannot readily be gauged. It must be remembered that there is a hint of the abnormal in an emotional case; therefore, there is no expected behavior with relation to reading success or failure. As was previously noted, it is difficult to determine whether the emotional factor is a cause or the effect of the reading disability.

On more than one count it was determined that there was no exclusive factor or influence responsible for reading failure. There was an interplay of factors responsible for a lack of success in the ability to read and even with these influences present, a counteracting force brought to bear upon the subject could serve as a remedying agent.

The environmental influences defined in the preceding chapter indicated some causes of reading failure. However, these influences were not deemed unalterable. Motivation contributes toward remedying deficits in certain pre-reading skills necessary for beginning reading. The task of motivating implied the use of techniques and methods whereby the beginning readers or those who are seemingly failing can actually experience the pre-reading skills.

Each influence as a separate reactor or a combina-
tion of influential factors had as supplemental agent the clinician, the teacher, or the parent.

Implications for Parents, Teachers and Clinicians

It was determined therefore, that parents can effect a deliberate influence upon a child's later success in the reading process and this can be done in a planned fashion. Grotsberg suggests the following as an aid to parents in assuring success in reading or in effecting a cure in order to attain success:

1. Recognize the fact you are an educator.
2. Interact with your child verbally, intellectually, socially, and emotionally.
3. Show them you are a dependable, reliable person to learn from.
4. Encourage your children to explore their environments at home, on trips, or through books.
5. Set up goals for your children and reward them for their accomplishment.
6. Give them toys that will help them become sensitive to shape, color, sound and other stimuli in their environment.
7. Teach them to express themselves and to listen to others.
8. Love them.¹

When not present within the home environment nor deliberately acted upon by the parent(s), the essential factor insuring successful achievement in reading can be supplemented by the teacher of reading or the clinician. Austin indicated areas of consideration for the teacher or

¹Grotsberg, "Role of the Parent..." pp. 38-39.
clinician in augmenting pre-reading skills. These include:

1. The readiness of the whole child: mental, physical, emotional, experimental, and verbal.
2. Continuous diagnostic and corrective teaching: guiding each child so that he may achieve according to his various abilities.
3. Recognition of individual differences: each child progressing at his own rate and according to his needs and abilities.
4. Systematic and sequential development of basic reading skills, with a proper balance between word skills, and comprehensive skills.
5. Use of an adequate variety of reading materials at each level and for each subject area, with a range from simple to challenging to meet all abilities.
6. Use of a flexible curriculum that may be adapted to the needs and abilities of all children.
7. Use of materials that are interesting to children and related to their interests.
8. A stimulating, motivational learning environment, with favorable teacher-pupil, pupil-pupil dynamics.¹

Because the environmental circumstances can be acted upon either by change or supplementation, successful reading achievement can thereby be assured. The parent, under the guidance of the teacher or clinician, can effect the necessary change. Children are flexible and will respond favorably when love and understanding accompany the effort to effect results.

Conclusions

The influences determining reading success or failure were said to be found in four main categories, namely, cultural, emotional, intellectual and social. These influences, though neither conclusive nor exclusive, tended to supply the reasons or causes for reading failure. It was noted that once these influences were defined, investigated in relation to a definite reading disability and subsequently remedied, success could ensue.
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