ABSTRACT

        This paper examines some of the problems associated
with unquestioned teaching practices and theories ("sacred cows") in
the field of reading. Topics discussed include phonics,
pronunciation, oral reading, teacher accountability and behavioral
objectives, individualized reading, and the open classroom. (KS)

Sacred Cows That Should Be Put to Pasture

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Having been closely identified with reading for more years than
I care to divulge - all the way from phonics to linguistics, reading
circles to reading stations, screwed-down desks and seats to neither
desks nor seats - perhaps I am able to look at the reading area with a
bit of perspective that some of you of later vintage may now have. The
past has seen the origin of some beliefs and practices that persist
today in spite of research and just plain common sense. These are the
sacred cows that I think we should examine and put in pasture, for
they have lived their life of usefulness. As I worked on this topic,
however, I find some practices and beliefs of more recent origin that
I begin to question. Keeping to my theme of sacred cows, I suppose
I might refer to these as sacred calves that need to be watched
carefully. Perhaps, like many educational calves of the past, they
will put themselves out to pasture in due course of time. Right now they
do seem to be consuming a questionable amount of educational nutriment.

- PHONICS

The first sacred cow that I shall refer to, and believe me it is
sacred, is that phonics knowledge and skill is the primary approach, and
some would say the only approach, to word identification. Let me make

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it clear that I do believe in the usefulness of phonics in word identifi-
cation but as a supplement to other approaches. That phonics has become
a revered set of skills in word perception is evidenced by the frequently
heard comment made by both parents and teachers, "Jerry is having
trouble with reading because he doesn't know 'his' phonics." Teachers
have taught the consonant symbol-sound relationships, the long vowel
and short vowel principles, c and g when followed by e, i, and y,
syllabication, syllabic division, vowel sounds in accented and
unaccented positions, and sound blending. Phonic activities -
games, tapes, records, kits, cards, drill books, and programmed materials
have appeared on the market ad infinitum.

The assumption being made as to the utility of phonics is the
same one that Rudolph Flesch made in his Why Johnnie Can't Read -
that our written language is alphabetic with letters designating the
phonemes or sounds of spoken language. Hence, to pronounce the word
the reader need only to turn the printed symbol into its spoken counter-
part. What a logical fallacy we have come to accept. In fact some
psycholinguists contend that the existance of separate spoken words is
false to fact. We don't speak words; we speak utterances. Our words
are connected one to the other in a continuous string of sounds that, as
in listening to a foreign language speaker, all we hear is what appears
to be a string of gibberish. It is only in written discourse that
words are evident since one is separated from another by white spaces -

a typesetter's convenience, someone said. Hence, turning printed symbols into separate spoken words is a psycholinguistic artifact.

But apart from that idea, decoding from letters to sound is as inefficient as it is unnecessary. Time and time again teachers have complained that though children knew "their sounds" they couldn't synthesize them into words, or if they could, they couldn't comprehend what they had read. Small wonder! Frank Smith in his Psycholinguistics and Reading (p. 186) refers to a finding of the Southwest Regional Laboratory for Educational Development that 166 phonic rules are required to account for the most frequent correspondence in 6000 one- and two-syllable words in the vocabulary of six- to nine-year-olds. And even then, the 166 rules would not account for over ten percent of the most frequently used words which would have to be considered exceptions. Phonics "rules" work best in explaining the pronunciation of words we can already pronounce.

The efficient reader is not the one who pauses at an unfamiliar word to "sound it out," but who uses context cues to tell him what function the unknown word must serve in the sentence and what meaning it must convey to make sense. A logical inference should cue the reader to the likely word, and sentence or paragraph context should then confirm his judgment.

For example, if a child were to attempt to apply the "sounding out" procedure to the word pumpkin he would have to use at least eleven

bits of phonic information, a quite difficult feat. But put the word
in this sentence, "Mr. Jones, do you have a _____ I could buy;
I want to make a jack-o-lantern," and as long as our reader is reading
for meaning he should never have to resort to sounding out. Syntactic
and semantic context should be quite sufficient. In cases where
context would admit several possible choices, minimal phonic cues
will aid in selecting the appropriate word. I say minimal phonic
cues because usually the word's initial or/and final phonogram usually
will be sufficient. For example, in the sentence, "The postman put
a _____ in the mailbox," the unfamiliar word might be letter,
package, or envelope. Noting that the word begins with 1/1/ and
ends with r/r/ tells the reader that the word is letter and not package.

Time does not permit a discussion of other aids to word identifica-
tion, namely word structure and the dictionary. The point I am making
here is that phonics as the primary approach to word identification
has serious limitations and that the "sounding out" procedure, if used
at all, should be the reader's last resort, and much of the time spent
on phonics instruction and drill will be unnecessary.

WORD PRONUNCIATION

Another sacred cow, so sacred that I even hesitate to discuss it,
for it has been a part of our conventional practice from time immemorial,
is that efficient reading is saying or thinking the exact words that the

author has written. We assume that the writer's words are hallowed and any deviation from them is an error to be corrected at once.

It shouldn't have been necessary for psycholinguists to point out that reading is essentially a search for meaning. The writer is conveying ideas or meaning and the reader's task is to reconstruct it, but somewhere along the line we have confused words and meaning and we have taught reading as a process of word identification rather than one of reconstructing meaning.

But I can hear your question - in order to get meaning don't words have to be read, to be recognized, to be called? Of course there are words on the page and they must be identified as stimuli to meaning, but the problem becomes one of emphasis, for if we emphasize words we begin to insist on the reader's precise identification of each word as it is written, and in doing so, quite unconsciously, perhaps, make reading the act of word calling rather than idea creating.

Take for example, the following sentence which appears in the context of an exciting western story, "The cowboy rode his horse into the corral." A child reads it, "The cowboy rode his pony into the corral." Frequently a big issue would be made over the reader's so-called error of saying "pony" for "horse." Hands go up around the group; the teacher stops the child immediately after pony is spoken, has the sentence reread, stressing the fact that he "must read more carefully."

The fact of the matter is that the child was reading far better than the teacher was willing to permit. The essential idea of the sentence was that someone got someplace on something, and whether it was by horse or pony conveys the essential meaning perfectly. Though the reader has made a semantic miscue he has not made a reading error. Had our reader read the sentence using "house" instead of "horse" the meaning would have been destroyed, an act which the reader would immediately detect and correct, if he is reading for meaning. Or take another sentence, "Last spring I planted grass seed only to have a _____ rain wash it all away." Would it make one particle of difference whether in reading it I use the word severe, torrential, hard, or violent? Any one of those words would have carried the essential meaning.

The point I wish to make is that what the teacher emphasizes in her teaching is what the reader is going to give priority to in his reading. If reading instruction is word drill and more word drill, letter sounds and more letter sounds, vowel rules and more vowel rules; if the reader's progress is evaluated in terms of the number of words he can identify and the accuracy with which he can apply phonics rules, then his reading will reflect this emphasis and ideas and meaning will be secondary. And teachers will complain as I have so frequently heard, "I can't understand it, my children do a good job of saying the words but they don't comprehend."

The literature reports a study where children in grade four through six were asked, "What is reading?" Representative responses included. "Reading is when you see a group of words in a sentence." "Reading is something you do when you look at words and you say them aloud or silently." "Reading is where you say a bunch of words . . . if you don't know the words sound them out." These children are telling us in no uncertain terms what the point of emphasis in their instruction has been.

Teach children to perceive words? Of course! But teach it as a means to an end rather than as the end. Words, though important, are only servants to meaning. A friend of mine puts it well when she says, "A word centered reader watches the hole while the mouse gets away."

ORAL READING

The next sacred cow that I shall refer to I would not put out to pasture, but slaughter on the spot. I am referring to oral reading-round or "round robin" reading. I don't need to describe it for you know it all too well. I am reluctant to refer to it because it has been railed against for so long that one can hardly believe it exists. But it does, and in surprising places.

The continued use of this practice in spite of all that has been said and written about it seems to be implied in a teacher's question

that bowled me over completely - "What else do you do in a reading lesson?"
At least she asked a frank and, I hope, honest question. She had
apparently missed the idea that many activities go under the rubric
of reading instruction. They range all the way from discussing the
meaning and implication of content read silently, listening to the
teacher interpret a story or poem, working with the teacher on the
development of a particular understanding, working independently on
the practice of a needed skill, to planning and carrying out some
reading-related activity, and many, many other similar activities. It
is not reading around the class. Apparently some must think that there
is a teacher's eleventh commandment, "Thou must hear every child read
aloud every day." So far as I know, no such admonition exists.

Oral reading, or oral interpretation as I much prefer, is for the
purpose of interpreting to interested listeners a writer's ideas,
information, feeling, mood, or action. It takes place when there is some
purpose or need for doing it. As a result several days or lessons
may go by with no interpretive reading being done simply because there
was no reason for it. On the other hand many situations arise where
they are very legitimate reasons for interpretive reading, as when the
action or interest of a story can be enhanced through an informal
dramatization with children taking the parts of the characters,
or where a pupil wishes to interpret an exciting passage from a book
being read as personal reading, or where the children wish to prepare
to entertain children on a lower grade level with interpretive reading
of poetry. We read aloud when there is a legitimate reason for doing it.
Otherwise no.

That pupils themselves have negative feelings about purposeless oral reading came to the fore several years ago when I asked my junior and senior university students in our basic methods class to tell me what they could remember of the things their teachers had done that either "turned them on or off" reading. One of the "off" activities that was high on their list was oral reading round. Those who admitted being less than competent readers found it humilating or embarrassing. The competent ones found it just plain boring. To permit reading to regress to the place where it is embarrassing for some and boring to others certainly doesn't contribute to its becoming a viable influence in the lives of young people.

I think it well to point out that oral interpretation, properly taught, may make an important contribution to the aesthetic development of the child similar to that of art, music, or the dance by providing an opportunity for creative self-expression. As such it becomes an important objective in a well-rounded reading program.

ACCOUNTABILITY - Behavioral Objectives

Accountability - the idea that teachers must be accountable for the progress and performance of their pupils - has ushered in another sacred cow that needs to be examined very carefully in its relation to reading.

One would have difficulty in denying the concept of accountability. Of course a teacher needs to have objectives, to know how to help each

pupil attain them, and be able to assess the extent to which they
have been attained. In fact I have long insisted that part of the low
achievement of some pupils could be attributed to the fact their teachers
seemed to have little idea of where they were going in their reading
program. So I cannot criticize the general concept of accountability.
I do take issue, however, with the way the concept is being applied in
some cases, for carried to its illogical conclusion it seems to indicate
that the total act of reading may be broken down into a sequence of skills.
Each skill is clearly defined, exercises to teach it developed and
introduced in sequential order. Mastery of the skill is demonstrated,
whereupon the subject progresses to the next higher order skill.
When mastery is not demonstrated through a criterion referenced test
the subject returns to the same skill which he practiced until he attains
the required level of performance. Detailed records are kept through
some type of management system so that the teacher knows at any time
where each child is in the skill sequence.

Botel and Botel (2) conclude that the functions and values of
behavioral objectives are administration rather than educational.
Imposing, as they do, a rigid and objective criterion of instructional
effectiveness, skill mastery, or performance, administrators are
always able to show the public that it is getting its money's worth
for the dollars invested. If performance is less than expected he
knows where to place the responsibility for it is the teacher who is
accountable, and action must be taken to improve performance.

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Botel and Botel also point out something that those who have had experience with behavioral objectives are already cognizant. Namely that they detract from a teacher's individual style, creativity, and "instructional wisdom." They place a burden on the teachers' time and preparation. They are inclined to undermine self-confidence, since teachers are under constant pressure to reassure themselves and their superiors that they are doing an effective job. They confine teachers' tasks to stated objectives rather than give them freedom to explore into avenues that arise spontaneously and that may be more rewarding than the unit's stated objectives. They make the teacher a skill master rather than a creative leader of learning.

There is no agreement, even among reading specialists themselves as to the identity of the reading skills. Any methods text will list the skills and competencies to be developed in word identification, comprehension, etc., but outside of a few items there will be little agreement as to what the skills are, or the order or the time at which they are to be taught.

The market is now being flooded with criterion referenced reading systems. One such system identifies 32 skills and instructional objectives in word identification. Another lists 367 skills and objectives for pupils in grade I through VI with 77 self-scoring tests to assess mastery. A management system indicates whether the child is to go to the next sequence or is to be retreaded over the same one. Another program lists 90 objectives in grades I through IV; another 45, and so it goes. Who is to say what the skills are in the first place?

But the major objection, it appears to me, is fragmenting the
reading act into a bunch of widgets, minutia, slivers and assuming
that when the pupil has digested all 367, 90, or 45 that he has learned
to read. Rather, he has become a devalued receptacle of skills and
his teacher a technician who dispenses them. In the midst of all our
concern over humanizing education how can we permit ourselves to get
hung up on skill sequencing, McBee Key Sort Cards, and reading
profiles. The life blood of reading is gone and only the bare bones
remain. The fun, the thrill of reading, the vicarious adventure are
gone and the residue is as dry as the Sahara on a windy day. A
seven sentence skill practice exercise over which the reader answers
three factual or inferential questions is entirely different from a
seven page story in which the child looses himself in time and space.
One of my friends who was an on-site investigator for one of these
skill oriented programs made a keen observation when he said, "The children
could be in such a program for a whole year and never read a book."

There I think is the major and most serious limitation of such
a skills program - the likelihood of its becoming divorced from reading.
Yes, there are skills to be developed in reading - whether there are
367, 582, or 45 I don't know nor do I think it makes much difference
so long as there is a logically organized program. But the skills that are
taught should be the means to an end rather than the end. The end, the
goal, the star in the sky for the reader is not the ability to apply,

consciously or unconsciously, a set of skills, but to enjoy reading or use the information he gets as a result of it. Any skill taught, be it word perception or comprehension should be taught in close conjunction with the reading that is being done, for that is the reason skills are needed in the first place. The criterion for reading growth in my book, and the goal I hope for my grandchildren, is not the number or degree to which skills are being mastered, but the extent they are reading and enjoying reading. Heaven forbid that we get so carried away with accountability, management systems, and reading profiles that by doing so we lose the child because he sees reading as something to master rather than something to enjoy.

INDIVIDUALIZED READING

Another sacred cow goes by a name that we all revere - individualized reading, and to raise one's voice against it is like speaking disparagingly about applie pie and mother. This cow I would not put out to pasture, for who dare fault the idea of instruction geared to the needs of each child? Consequently I would change its spots, give it a different name and retain it as a valuable part of the herd. This animal I would rename, "personalized reading."

But the change is not one of label only. Let me explain. Individualized reading, individually prescribed instruction, individually guided instruction, programmed instruction, or by whatever label it goes

takes various forms, but all are based on the idea that learning to read is an individual act derived from individual interests, needs, learning rates, and styles. Hence the approach should be highly individualized - the child selects his own content related to his interests and reading level- which then becomes the basis for instruction given in a kind of tutorial relationship involving teacher and child; or each child's reading needs are assessed daily and an individual assignment is prepared by the teacher which the child completes; or a series of lessons or lesson books are arranged by code or colors which the child completes, takes a test, records his name on a record sheet, and moves to the next sequence. The most recent version of individualized reading is something called "station teaching" with work areas set up, each involving some type of activity - skill lessons, tapes, or records, questions to answer over a story read, creative writing, and the like. Each child is assigned to certain stations according to his assumed needs.

Personalized reading, on the other hand, is based on the concept that instruction may be most effectively and efficiently taught as a social activity where children representing some degree of similarity may learn together with and from each other under the direction of a teacher, but where within this social context, their personal interests and needs are recognized.

In this classroom we might see a teacher and a group of eight, ten, or a dozen children discussing a story that has been common reading. The teacher throws out an open-ended, judgment-type question, a child

responds, a second child reacts to the first response, the teacher
suggests another avenue of thought, several other children respond.
A game of verbal ping pong is in progress, the verbal ball bounced
from teacher to child - to child - to teacher - to child. Reading
takes on all the characteristics of the discussion of a new book that
a group of adults have read.

But the teacher is thoroughly cognizant that within this group
structure there are divergent needs and interests that must be recognized.
So within this group structure each child may be reading a book from
the school library representing his personal interests ranging all the way
from space travel to life in colonial Williamsburg; several children
are working together under the direction of a teacher or aide over a
skill or understanding with which help is needed. Another group is
working on a puppet show growing out of a story that all have read.
Reading is being personalized rather than individualized.' Reading is
a lot like golf. Though one's performance is individual, enjoyment
comes from the social participation that the game affords, along with
the stimulation that grows out of trying to do as well as one's friends.

Moreover, the teaching of critical or creative reading, almost
demands a group situation, regardless of any other considerations,
for here the teacher is no longer checking on a child's comprehension
of the content, but is directing a discussion among children using
their judgments, reactions, and responses to a common body of content.

This can be done effectively on as children are given an opportunity
to respond to, to question, to challenge each other and to think
through together the implications that the content may have. It is
through this kind of situation that the affective dimension of reading
is developed, for the outcome is not skills but attitudes, understandings,
appreciations, and changed patterns of behavior, a side of reading that is
being sadly neglected.

In passing, just a word or two concerning station teaching - one
of our latest innovations. Frankly, I have seen some awfully shoddy
activities being carried on in the name of station teaching - and some
very good ones too. The undesirable ones are busy work, pure and simple,
and calling it a station activity or saying that the child is exercising
an option does not add one thing to its value. Busy work is still
busy work whether children are filling in blanks on a worksheet at
a "station" or are sitting at their desks in the middle of the room. Choices
are good, but the criterion of goodness is whether the activity has
educational value.

THE OPEN CLASSROOM

Another sacred cow, possibly more accurately referred to as a
sacred calf (a co-worker of mine sopke of it as the golden calf), which
may have its demise before it can become a cow, is the open classroom.

And understand I am referring to it only in relation to reading. It is
difficult to define this organizational structure because it takes
so many different forms, but the underlying philosophy appears to be
freedom, openness, self-discovery, self-motivation, and other equally
elusive concepts. Some have said that this movement is a reflection
of the times in which we are living - do your own thing, renounce
long term objectives, whatever gives pleasure is good, or "turn on, tune
in, and drop out." What is beginning to take place is the very thing
that brought about the decline of the Progressive Movement of several
decades ago - the misplaced idea that sound educational achievement can
take place without regard for organization, system, or plan.

It has been difficult to secure objective results of the open
classroom environment beyond what one finds in testimonials of
proponents and reporter critics. The most carefully controlled study
that has come to my attention is that of Wright (3) who used data
from 100 fifth grade children enrolled in two elementary schools -
one organized traditionally and the other an open environment.
After 2½ years of instruction the two groups were compared over fifteen
pupil outcome variables, using the Stanford Achievement Test as well
as measures of school anxiety - and creativity. Wright reports that
"the direction of the differences on each of these achievement variables
indicates that the children in the open school have a conspicuous
deficiency in the academic skill areas." For example the combined
means of boys and girls in paragraph meaning in the conventional situation

5.16 (grade level) against 4.63 for the open school. In other words, there was a half year of difference in favor of the structural situation. In mathematics applications the difference was even more striking - approximately three-fourth of a year's difference in favor of the conventional classroom group. Surprisingly, too, children in the open classroom scored higher in school anxiety and lower in creativity - than those in the conventional classroom.

As I have said in a published article (1) there is much that is needed to make reading instruction effective. I need only to refer to devitalized, uninspired instruction where neither teachers nor pupils give evidence that reading is either useful or enjoyable; where there is endless and monotonous drill on skills divorced from use; where there is an over-rigid curriculum with a prescribed amount of content to be covered in a given segment of time, and where a child's progress is measured by where he "should be" for his age and grade on a standardized test.

Is the open classroom a solution to such situations as these? I fear not. Not if we assume that children are so self-motivated to learn to read that the teacher's role is passive, or that a child's current interest and sense of direction can replace a teacher's planned sequence of instructional objectives.

The open classroom movement may make a contribution to reading as well as to wholesome child development if the concept of freedom to learn to read is coupled with the responsibility of the teacher to

teach. For how free can a child be if he can't read, or how free is he, if as a young adult, he can't get or hold a job because of his inability to read?

The open classroom is not children sitting on the floor or under a table though there should be no objection to their sitting there if doing so serves some legitimate objective. Though open space and wall-to-wall carpet may enhance the learning environment and give pupils and teachers freedom to move about, they are really secondary in importance. The open-classroom is a way of thinking about children and young people. Because it exists in spirit rather than structure it could be found in any room with walls and a door.

Let's not get carried away with organizational schemes and architectural designs, or even with instructional approaches, for in the final analysis it is the teacher who makes the difference. This golden calf, the open classroom, needs lots of direction lest it go the way of all the other calves that our histories of education so vividly describe.

CONCLUSION

So there are my sacred cows in reading that I would like to consider either for retirement, or a change in the direction toward which they seem to be going. The end result of all our efforts from here on out must be generations of readers who read effectively and who use the products of reading to enhance their lives or to solve our problems. In doing so we can ill afford to unquestioningly worship the past or uncritically evaluate the present.

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