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THE GREAT DEBATE ABOUT READING GOES ON AND ON

The "phonics-first" versus the "look-say" method of teaching children to read has been a burning education controversy ever since the publication of Rudolf Flesch's 1955 book "Why Johnny Can't Read." Generally, those with a vested interest in the school system and textbooks try to belittle the phonics advocates as lacking in credentials.

One study, however, which was not ignored because it came from a source with impressive education credentials, and also was written in the cushioned circumlocution of educational jargon, was a 1967 book by Dr. Jeanne S. Chall called "Learning to Read: The Great Debate." It was based on a three-year study (1962-1965) of beginning reading methods which was sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation of New York; it also covered the relevant research on this subject from 1910 to 1965.

Dr. Chall's book, which cautiously indicated the superiority of phonics over look-say, became an education best-seller. It stimulated professional symposia and turned out to be a book that had to be addressed by any research on the subject done after that.

For the two decades before her book was published, reading textbooks had virtually achieved what she tactfully called a consensus on the look-say method. Her book broke the monopoly of the look-say approach over reading textbooks, and subsequent readers became look-say readers sprinkled lightly with phonics as one might salt a TV dinner.

Dr. Chall recently published a new "Updated Edition" designed to answer the many inquiries she has received since 1967 on what has happened since then. The new edition is the original book in full with a new 52-page section at the beginning (with seven pages of references) entitled, "Introduction to the Second Edition: An Update."

This updated section is by far the most important part of the book and is "must" reading for any serious student of the question of why we have 23 million functional illiterates today. But an "error" was made by the publisher (McGraw-Hill); the Table of Contents lists only the 1967 Introduction and text and does not show that the new section exists, so that few people who pick up the book will realize that it contains much new

research which confirms and strengthens the earlier findings.

Dr. Chall notes that currently-used readers show a definite movement toward more emphasis on phonics and toward teaching it earlier than in 1967. Yet, she notes that the "great debate" of the late 1960s still goes on with emotion and passion on both sides.

She notes that fewer researchers ask which approach produces the better results; instead more seem to ask which is the better theory. In addition to the crux of the debate over phonics versus look-say, the jargon includes such variations as whether reading is a "psycholinguistic guessing game" or a process of "decoding print into spoken form."

In view of the impressive research showing better performance by the phonics method, Dr. Chall now wonders in print why the debate over reading methods is so ideological, so much concerned with theory, instead of addressing itself to the question of which method produces the better results. She finds this "puzzling" because so much more evidence exists today as to what works in practice.

She asks, could it be that the phonics debate is only a part of a much broader debate — one concerned with how children are to be educated and what they are to be taught, rather than merely with whether or not they can read?

She points out that, if primary reading methods alone were the problem, educators would accept the results of the research which shows the validity of the phonics methods. Yet, she says, the "the strong positions, both in the 1960s and in the 1980s, on issues that seem to keep coming back again and again in different forms, suggest broader reasons."

Dr. Chall says that one reason might be the substantial financial investment in the present elementary textbook series and its monetary rewards to the authors and publishers. There are only about 13 publishers that publish reading textbook series and the four most popular have more than 50% of the sales; it takes $25 million to invest in a new series.

Dr. Chall suggests that the more important reason is the differences in philosophies and goals of education. The look-say method is associated with "progressive education" while phonics is associated with "traditional schooling, with drill and hard work."