

The Foundations of Literacy

Don Holdaway

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perfect method was mounted—a search that was to continue for three generations. As method followed method, the statistics of success and failure remained remarkably constant, yet everyone declared that things were different when they went to school—and so reaction set in demanding a return to methods which in their day had failed. The swinging pendulum became an all too accurate symbol of educational thinking and an indictment on the common sense of a people and a profession. Meanwhile, children everywhere learned to talk.

Method or madness

Reading has enjoyed an unassailable pre-eminence in schooling in the modern age and there is no difficulty in understanding why—it is the only doorway to Western, linear culture—the very symbol of education. Reading as a school subject has thus become essential in the fantasy experience of even the most lowly modern parent. The ordinary parent is *deeply* concerned with only one aspect of schooling—'teach my children to read and you can do anything else you like with them'. It is impossible to understand the continuing melodrama of factionally competing methods without becoming aware of the peculiar power that reading represents in the minds of modern people. Anyone who cannot spell, write legibly or figure accurately can expect a degree of sympathetic indulgence, but failure in reading has been fantasized into a modern sin.

As might be expected, succeeding methodologies have each emphasized something vital in the full story of literacy learning. After all, each major method has been successful for about the same proportion of children, while at the same time producing its own crop of failures. And it is to their successes that teachers point in justification of the method being used—the failures can always be explained in terms of factors in the children or beyond the school such as laziness, low intelligence, cultural deprivation, broken homes, lack of basics, or whatever the fashion in educational ideas suggests.

Although each methodology has emphasized some vital insight about the learning process, often in response to an important, prevailing psychological theory narrowly interpreted, such insights have been readily put aside as the next reform has taken hold. Over and over again, in the ardour of oversimplified reaction, the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. In almost every conflict of reading method it would be true to say that both sides had been right in insisting that their insights were crucial, but both sides had been abysmally wrong in insisting that the insights of the other side were totally mistaken. Both sides have usually been culpable also in focussing on low level, perceptual skills and in failing to see the matter of literacy whole and in relationship to other disciplines. All the characteristic mistakes of abstraction and factionalism have compounded the debate in tragically irrational ways.

Thankfully, the home, where the infant learns to speak, is not an arena for factions or public debate. Violent shifts in method have never been a characteristic of the oral-language development of infants. Furthermore, the rich, developmental-learning environment provided in the home embodies the many apparently contradictory factors vital to language learning, and does not overemphasize one at the expense of another. [We should acknowledge, however, that there are enormous differences between homes in the adequacy with which they enrich the language environment of young children, and return to a closer study of such differences later in our investigation.]

Extreme polarities of method developed as the pendulum swung. First

2 Historical Viewpoints and Current Practices

Literacy has been so central a function of schooling that major aspects of this one undertaking have tended to be regarded as separate subjects and have developed methodologies of their own, often in philosophical conflict with each other. Thus, it has been typical to see separate programmes in reading, writing, spelling, and composition or written expression operating in quite unrelated compartments, with reading taking pride of place. In spoken-language learning no-one would consider separating listening from speaking (although when 'oracy' recently became an important concern of the schools, this is precisely what tended to happen).

Even more distant from classroom practice is the notion that since thinking, expressing, and experiencing are centrally related to language, the literacy programme should be closely linked to other subjects, and to the related arts in particular. Here again, no such artificial barriers are set up in the pre-school, developmental environment in which spoken language is mastered.

Methodologies for teaching the different aspects of literacy have tended to develop along narrow, pragmatic lines dictated by classroom expediency and justified by success in achieving limited goals. The limitation of goals tended to spring from examination or evaluation measures imposed by authority figures in the institutional framework. Little thought was given to how children actually learn language skills, and teaching methodologies were developed for each subject as if a quite different type of learning was involved. Emphasis was on the perceptual and performance skills which could be readily measured and were superficially different in each 'subject', while common central features of language, such as understanding and expressing meanings, tended to be overlooked.

Slow progress towards universal education kept alive the false expectation that by attending school all children would learn to read and write. Even when the problems of the dull, the poor, and the plainly 'bad' children were sorted out as justifiable exceptions, it gradually became apparent that the schools were failing to fulfil the dream in far too many cases. What else could be wrong but the methods of teaching?

The failure of the schools was met with frustrated concern and heated public debate about what they should be doing. Methodologies changed radically from time to time as educational dreamers and opportunists provoked anxiety and capitalized on the ever-vocal disaffection. The search for the

there was the opposition between the teaching of alphabet names and the teaching of letter sounds, both of which are necessary to teaching reading in a way that is intelligible to young children. Next there was the polarity between phonics and whole-word perception, both of which again, properly understood as aspects of how the reader functions, are essential to proper processing. This type of opposition became refined by academics into analytic-versus-synthetic approaches—whether we start from the smallest elements and build into larger ones or the reverse. This formulation has a nice respectable sound about it, even though in its factional setting it is a cover for stupidity of the first order.

In spoken-language acquisition we see some of these same apparent oppositions as features of healthy functioning. In the listening/speaking complex, infants operate both analytically and synthetically from the beginning, sorting meaningful words from larger utterances and *simultaneously* struggling with the precise articulatory details at the phonemic level. Spoken-language acquisition is characterized by 'integrated function'. This is so sensible and right, both in the growth of speech and the growth of reading that it is difficult to understand why so much energy has been wasted on such artificial problems in the 'great debate' about methods of teaching reading. Perhaps Jeanne Chall's famous locution, 'Reading: The Great Debate', should be changed to 'Reading: The False Debate', for there is little of greatness about it.

With the work of Arthur Gates in the thirties a new battle was mounted between oral and silent reading, between word accuracy and 'comprehension'. This argument did at least bring meaning into the picture squarely for the first time, and it could be said that if the fine research and speculation of Gates had not been factionalized, reading may have been placed on a sound basis. However, the vogue for ten 'comprehension questions' into which Gates's work tended to be boiled down, became a destructive influence itself. Meaning had again become separated from the integrity of the reading process—which is one in which comprehension takes place at the centre of the activity and not at its periphery.

More recently, following the monumental analysis of Jeanne Chall (1967), the polarity has been between what she called 'code emphasis' versus 'meaning emphasis'. Each of these traditional polarities represents an extreme oversimplification of the reading process. The really important question is, 'How do these apparently contradictory aspects of learning to read fit into the total picture?'

In his remarkable work of 1908, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, E. B. Huey had already analysed the true issues of the 'great debate' and exposed the errors of a perception-oriented approach to reading. After seventy years we still face essentially the same debate. It is clear that the sources of unreason lie deep in the assumptions about learning and teaching which our culture of schooling cherishes.

The teaching of handwriting, spelling and written expression have never generated a comparable debate nor been induced into the violent swings of method that have characterized reading. The problem has more often been one of neglect and sterility centred around the same general philosophical mistakes as were made with reading—the isolation of related skills in subject compartments, and the concentration of teaching effort on superficial, perceptual and mechanical aspects rather than on integrated function.

The production of written language is a hazardous process in a corrective instructional environment such as a school. Letters have to be correctly formed by immature muscles, words have to be correctly spelled in defiance of any

rational system, grammatical structures have to be correctly formed, and if you are lucky, communicable meanings have to be encoded. It is little wonder that many children escape the dangers of the corrective environment by producing as little written language as the school will allow.

Here again, the developmental model contrasts strongly with the instructional model as implied by actual teaching. If we were to expect immediate correctness and perfection of articulation from children learning to speak, the learning of spoken language would be almost as hazardous and its production as sparse. Infants would tend to say as little as possible for fear of correction or embarrassment. They wouldn't need to be as apprehensive of the competitive environment as school children must be, but they would certainly be silent more often than they are.

A thumbnail sketch of reading methods

There has always been a tendency, as we have already noticed, to look upon reading as a matter of recognizing words—what we have called a 'perceptual and mechanical focus'. Early methodologies provoked dissent at this level and there is, therefore, not a great deal to be gained from a detailed historical study. In the following simplified account of methods of the past century, we will attempt to identify the vital insights embedded in the dispute.

Alphabetic versus Phonetic

In the alphabetic approach children were taught to recognize the letters and be able to name them—the approach started with detailed visual discrimination. When a child came upon a word which he didn't recognize, he was required to spell out the word letter by letter and then attempt to pronounce it. An advantage of this approach not seen later was that the reader was given the opportunity for some sort of processing—he had a second or two to consider before committing himself to a response. During that valuable time he was required to observe all the letter detail and to do so in a strict left-to-right order. This may not have been the most appropriate thing to ask him to do with his time, but it was probably as helpful as 'sounding out' the letters without knowing which of its possible sounds each letter might be representing. Two valuable things stand out: the helpfulness of having a vocabulary with which to identify and talk about letters; and the importance of allowing processing-time for problem-solving in word recognition.

In the phonetic approach children were taught the sound associations of the letters (difficult for a five year old since some letters like 'a' have as many as nine common sound associations—at, ate, all, ark, away, head, wash, our, ear). On meeting a strange word the reader was expected to 'sound out' the letters and 'blend' them in such a way as to approximate to the sound of the word. Later he was expected to apply the rules of syllabification [which only editors and printers seem able to interpret, and then by some rather dishonest conventions apparently to be learned by exposure]. It is obvious that the possible letter-sound associations of a word can be helpful and vital clues in efficient word-recognition if used as *part* of a proper strategy—but what is the strategy? Certainly nothing like 'blending', which is one of the most intrinsically difficult tasks even for a mature adult reader. Tragically for children, it was not until the late forties that any attempt was made to study strategies and to teach them. Later we will explore why it is necessary for children to have a grasp of both letter-names and possible sound-representations if they are to make sense of instruction in reading. On the negative side, both of these methods detracted attention from the nature of reading as

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habits. It brought disrepute to the movement towards meaning and natural language by applying a narrow set of insights in blind faith rather than from an informed basis of research and practice. In the hands of unskilled teachers it degenerated rapidly into another look-and-say approach as teachers strove for security by teaching isolated words to ensure that children could 'really' recognize them. There was still the underlying assumption that the real test of reading was whether or not a child could recognize word items out of context. It must be admitted that authority figures in the system had more to do with enforcing this criterion than teachers, who as so often happened were forced into compliance in defence of their jobs.

Most importantly, perhaps, in a competitive structure which measured success and controlled advancement by movement through a series of 'readers', children and over-anxious parents soon learned the knack of fooling the teacher by learning each book by heart. This practice undermined the sentence approach even more than the whole-word approach.

Book approaches versus language-experience

Almost a generation had passed since 'readers' contained natural stories which had not been mangled to serve some instructional purpose—it was almost as if children were being forced to learn to read a different language from the one they spoke so well. Language-experience methods arose in reaction to this sorry state of affairs. It was realized that a major insight for the beginning reader must be that written language is talk written down. By developing reading materials from the children's own language about matters of which they had real experience it was hoped that a bridge would be built between familiar language and printed symbols. This approach also brought reading and the production of written language together for the first time in natural and helpful ways. Especially when teamed up with the sentence approach, language-experience brought an air of sanity into literacy teaching.⁴

However, practical difficulties tended to undermine the effectiveness of the approach: great demands were placed on teachers to prepare reading materials dictated by individuals or by groups of children, and it was difficult to provide for adequate repetition—as was done in a mechanical fashion by 'controlled vocabulary' readers—or to monitor the progress of children in clear and systematic ways. Transfer to book material was often undertaken too soon and without adequate preparation of children for the strangeness of the language they encountered in the readers then available in most classrooms.

More importantly, the language-experience approaches overlooked a number of crucial differences between written and spoken language. Oral language tends to occur in, and be supported by, the sensory and social situation in which it takes place, and its ambiguities are clarified by that situation—and by voice intonation, facial expression, and gesture. Written language lacks this situational support and has therefore developed conventions to avoid ambiguity which are so distinctive as to make it a special dialect. Furthermore, conversational language tends to deal with the trivial and the ordinary and usually lacks memorable content. Written language, on the other hand, is difficult or expensive to produce, and normally records memorable matters in as memorable a way as possible. A diet of ordinary conversational language in reading can be very boring and unsatisfying. If the labours of learning to deal with written language are to be thought worthwhile by the learners, they must be rewarded by very special meanings and satisfactions such as those stemming from exciting stories or patterned language. Endless instant 'stories' about going to the shop or visiting a fire station make dull

the creation of meanings. They grotesquely emphasized oral accuracy and in so doing reduced a receptive language-activity to a mere performance skill.

A major form of reading disability arises from this crucial distortion—what might be called the 'performance syndrome', in which children read for someone else and finally opt out of conscious attempts to understand or control the task. They can only perform when plugged in to another 'computer' which does the correcting, and when the contact is broken, the activity, for what it is worth, ceases. A wide range of characteristic disabilities, which we will study later, arise from the performance syndrome. *We need to remember that reading, although active and creative in making meanings, is a receptive, thinking skill like listening, and not an expressive performance skill like speaking.*

Phonetic versus whole word or 'look-and-say'

Following the remarkable discoveries of the Gestalt psychologists in the first quarter of the century, it was realized that in the great majority of cases word recognition involves the immediate perception of whole words. Mature readers seldom stop to analyse the letter-detail of any word, and even the learning reader doesn't really begin to read in any true sense until he recognizes 'at sight' the majority of words in a passage. [The work of the Gestalt psychologists, concerned with the perception of form and configuration, helped to rectify the synthetic bias of Western thinking, which had come to see all systems as starting from parts which were then built into wholes.]²

The look-and-say approach emphasized the teaching of whole words, or at least insisted that whole words should be taught to beginning readers and only later should any form of word analysis be introduced. However, little research was undertaken to determine what features or details of words are significant to children in recognizing or discriminating words—it was assumed too easily that shape or 'word form' (almost identical for many common words) triggered recognition.³ Two unfortunate practices became set during the reign of the look-and-say approach: new words were taught in isolation from a meaningful context before reading took place; and the concept of 'controlled vocabulary' changed the character of books for reading instruction in ways which distorted and impoverished the language quite grossly.

The debate which raged (and continues to rage in some quarters) between these opposing approaches was seldom reflected in absolute terms within actual classrooms—teachers tend to have more sense than to become extremists. However, great harm was done as proponents of both approaches began to influence publishers to produce 'readers' which lacked literary worth or interest, and destroyed natural language-use—whether they were phonetic readers or look-and-say readers.

Whole word versus sentence

In the middle of the look-and-say era thinking and research became more refined in some quarters, leading to techniques which still play a dominant part in modern instruction. One such movement was that arising from the insight that the smallest meaningful unit of language is the sentence, and that real reading must begin there, since only when meaning has been created has reading occurred. This methodology also stressed the importance of context clues in word solving and helped to reorient learning towards natural language-processes.

Taken to an extreme, however, the sentence method neglected vital features in the development of visual discrimination and basic directional

reading or writing, and may deeply misinform children about the proper purposes and rewards of literacy.

Language-experience techniques, however, do properly comprise an important part of any sound, modern literacy programme, and we will return to them repeatedly in the practical aspects of our study. An important recent development of the approach, *Breakthrough to Literacy*, is dealt with below.

The eclectic approach

As the limitations of different methods became slowly apparent, and as research indicated that different methods tend to suit different children, sensible people began to avoid dependence on a single method and use a combination of approaches loosely tied together without too much regard for an encompassing theory. Such practice came to be called the eclectic approach (meaning that practices were borrowed freely from a number of different sources) and an attempt was made to create more balanced programmes to meet differing individual needs.

Although such approaches marked a significant breakthrough in practice, and embodied a proper humility about current ignorance of the real processes of literacy learning, they inevitably lacked consistency and coherence. Things were done pragmatically without a clear idea of *why* they were being done. The organizational complexities of such programmes often led to little better than a hopeful chaos in which both children and teachers were deeply confused. Researchers continued to concentrate on the arid comparison of different methods and combinations of method, perpetuating the mistake of emphasizing instructional techniques rather than learning strategies.

During the fifties a determined effort was made in the United States to solve the literacy problem in the schools once and for all. Teams of very experienced and talented academics worked with publishers in creating 'basal' reading programmes supported by massive guidance to teachers in the shape of manuals and resource books of an extremely detailed nature—almost offensively prescriptive of every word the teacher should utter. These basal programmes reflected the best of informed opinion from many sources, presenting eclectic approaches in a coherent and systematic bundle. Brave attempts were made to rationalize conflicting theories and present packages which were balanced and responsible. Many of these programmes and the materials which supported them contained very fine things, and clearly improved the standard of reading instruction, but none of them came near to overcoming the inherent jumble-sale confusion of eclecticism. Towering figures, wise and committed, emerged—among them Gray, McKee, Russell, Dolch and Monroe—still worthy of study, but confined within a limiting tradition.⁵

At the end of the sixties the great American experiment had clearly failed, despite a level of support both economically and academically that no other country could conceivably mount. America seems to have returned to the crudities of pendulum thinking. Despite the fact that among them are strong voices speaking from a clear vision of what might be,⁶ they are being stamped by the recurrent public outcry into a back-to-basics movement without anyone having clarified just *what* the basics are.

Some important methodological experiments

In the past twenty years there have been a number of attempts at radical solutions to the literacy problem. Each has advanced our knowledge and range of technique in important ways—even if negatively. For reasons we must

explore, none has significantly altered the level of success and failure in the enterprise. Among the more influential of these movements are the following:

The organic vocabulary—Sylvia Ashton-Warner

Working in the look-and-say era, but with insight far in advance of current belief, a quite remarkable figure emerged in outback New Zealand. Sylvia Ashton-Warner, committed to teaching new entrants in a rural Maori school, brought her exceptional sensitivity as a novelist and artist to bear on the problems of leading non-European, rural children into literacy. Her work received little recognition in her home country—except among a responsive few—and it was not until the publication of her two novels, *Spinster* (1958) and *Teacher* (1965), that her ideas gained the recognition they deserved.

Basically, her insight was that reading should be motivated by the deepest springs of meaning in the human heart. Working from the tradition of look-and-say and language-experience, she provided her children on request with those words which most powerfully engaged them, words from the centre of their deepest fantasies—kiss, fight, beer, hit, Mum, aeroplane, fast car, blood, skeleton. These were once-seen-never-forgotten words which established an initial vocabulary for both reading and writing. In addition she broke down subject barriers over the whole curriculum and integrated all the arts both for their own sake and in the service of literacy. Placed in a context of modern linguistic insight, and broken free from the factional limitations of the time, Sylvia Ashton-Warner's insights are a joy to saddened hearts.

Reading through writing—Grace Fernald

Grace Fernald was a person of remarkable commitment to those children who were suffering because of what schooling had failed to do for them. She thought creatively about their plight and experimented fearlessly to find new entry points for reading following initial failure of the visually-orientated approaches of the normal classroom.

Starting from the simple securities of language-experience procedures, she explored the latent powers of sensory channels other than the visual, pioneering the use of tactile and kinaesthetic modes in literacy learning [Fernald 1943]. She realized that perception is a matter of meanings seeking expression through any sensory channel that is open, and through her success with children displaying exceptional problems, she broke down the dependence of traditional procedures on visual modes. For the first time in educational settings, language began to appear as the multi-sensory, multi-functional activity that it is.

Sound practice in ordinary classrooms now encompasses the use of tactile and kinaesthetic procedures in the teaching of reading and spelling. The acceptance of multi-modal involvement in literacy learning helps to remove traditional barriers between the teaching of literacy skills and the globally active functioning that characterizes developmental learning.

Individualized Reading—Jeanette Veatch

In an era dominated by basic-reading series and sequential programmes, and graded texts and workbooks, it was something of a crusade to suggest that children could learn to read using a wide range of trade books which they selected for themselves and read at their own pace, and it was something of a disaster that the educational climate was so unfavourable to such a sane and simple idea. Jeanette Veatch pioneered the techniques of individualized reading and fought the reading establishment with tremendous energy and skill.

It could be said that her approach to learning to read was the first clear statement of developmental principles in reading growth that was worked out

in detail and tested rigorously in classrooms. She had an incisive and zestful way with words and her books on the teaching of reading through individualized procedures remain classics in the field [Veatch 1959, 1966, 1968]. Her sensitivity to children, her common sense about the reading process, and her skill as a teacher justified the unbounded confidence she displayed in developmental learning before research had turned strongly in that direction. Individualized reading procedures provide a practical starting-point in a developmental approach to literacy learning—they establish a beach-head in the realm of the possible. Our study of these procedures and our use of them in the classroom may foster the extension of developmental modes within the school structure.⁷

The Initial Teaching Alphabet (i.t.a.)

Sir James Pitman, the descendant of a long family line of orthographic specialists, despaired at the reluctance of the establishment to consider a rational revision of English spelling. As the next best thing, in the interests of confused children, and as a possible way of educating a generation towards reform, he devised an alphabet for the initial teaching of literacy. A brilliant orthographic compromise, the Initial Teaching Alphabet could be used to spell words in a phonetically consistent way without markedly altering the shape, or *gestalt*, of most English words, and retained the major letter-to-sound associations of traditional orthography. He drew on his resources as a major educational publisher and an influential lobbyist to see that a significant range of books would be printed in the revised alphabet.

A formidable experimental structure was set up under the experienced leadership of John Downing and with the support of the English educational establishment. The idea was that children would learn to read and write in the i.t.a. medium and then make a change to traditional orthography after two or three years. Cynics predicted that the scheme would fail as children made the transition, and that their ability to learn traditional spelling would be seriously impaired. In fact, neither of these predictions was accurate, and this tended to show that once the *strategies* of literacy had been mastered and children had become familiar with the nature of the tasks, impediments such as phonetic irregularity could be taken in their stride (Downing 1967).

Of much greater significance was the release of expressive energy by children through the medium—most experimental settings displayed a great increase in the quantity and range of written expression produced. The fact that any reasonable spelling was accepted by teachers, and the consistent way in which written words could be created by children, seemed to release them from the fear of mistakes into a desire to write, similar in its scope to the desire of infants to experiment with speech. This is the only setting in which the principle of approximation has been tolerated for spelling, and it has confirmed what should have been expected from an application of the developmental model.

Deep-seated prejudices probably inhibited these teachers from taking the same tolerant view of approximation in reading behaviour, and may have been partially responsible for the failure of the approach to show significantly better long-term effects on reading. Other factors may include the bad match between the use of print in the real world (traditional orthography) and its use in instruction (i.t.a.); the application of the medium in methodologically archaic styles of phonics or look-and-say; and the inhibiting effect of such traditional assumptions about schooling as intensive correction and competition.

From the extensive research generated by the experiment no-one can doubt

that, from the orthographic point of view, the approach works. Thus its very efficiency as an orthography, combined with its failure to achieve significant long-term improvement, alerts us to the conclusion that orthographic irregularity is not central to the difficulties inherent in our ways of teaching literacy—that we need to look elsewhere for the major inhibiting forces which distort the literacy undertaking.

Breakthrough to Literacy

The most recent attempt at a radical reformulation of the literacy undertaking, and the only one which has attempted to face up squarely to language implications, arose from the application of recent linguistic theory in England. Deeply indebted to the language-experience tradition, *Breakthrough to Literacy* highlights the importance of creating written language from the earliest stages (Mackay, Thompson, and Schaub 1970).

The techniques and supporting materials make it possible for the beginner to express personal meanings in written language at the same time as he learns to read. The major impediments to written expression—handwriting and spelling—are bypassed in the first instance by providing a convenient file of printed word cards that may be manipulated into meaningful sentences in a 'Sentence Maker', and later copied into a personal reading book. Letters may also be manipulated to make words at a later stage of development. Grammatical understandings are facilitated by the use of affixes to modify base words rather than treating each derivative as a separate word.

An unfortunate limitation is the delay in the use of upper case letters, but this feature may not prove to be as essential to the system as the originators believed. Early books in the accompanying series are printed in lower case letters only. Any deviation from standard conventions of print as experienced in favourite books, names, labels, and TV commercials limits the opportunities to practise literacy in developmental ways. The instructional gains of tampering with the conventions as used in normal living are unlikely to compensate for the losses in natural experience of print from the earliest stages.

In experimental situations in Australia and New Zealand *Breakthrough to Literacy* has proved a significant success, although the results hardly warrant the claim of a breakthrough. Introduced into ordinary classrooms it presents great difficulties of an organizational nature and is not easy for teachers to understand fully. At best it provides the basis for a greatly facilitated language-experience programme, displaying the distinctive strengths and limitations of that approach. In combination with other techniques that will be discussed later in our enquiry, it has proved an exciting approach for children, generating a great increase in personal writing. At worst it decays into a new look-and-say approach, requiring the building of an extensive sight vocabulary before the system begins to deliver results in written expression and reading.

The insights embodied in the *Breakthrough to Literacy* materials deserve our serious consideration and we will return to them on several occasions.

Neglected sisters—handwriting, spelling, and written expression

Learning to produce conventionally acceptable written language presents the greatest combination of difficulties of any language task. While it is doubtful whether reading need be significantly more difficult to learn than listening, it is probably true that the combined challenges of handwriting, spelling, and written expression are significantly more difficult than learning to speak.

Refined muscular control of the hand and arm, together with hand-eye coordination, present special problems even in non-linguistic tasks. The irrationalities of spelling are, of course, notorious and need not be laboured—as someone has said, the trouble with modern English spelling is that it does not spell modern English. [Whitehall 1951, p.134].

The distinctive difficulty of written expression in comparison with speaking is not quite so obvious—it is largely a factor of pace. Linguistic expression takes the form of sentences, and production requires the ability to encompass the whole sentence in the *mind* from beginning to end during the execution. If the processes of production are very slow or are interrupted by extraneous cognitive and emotive problems such as the spelling of a word, it becomes difficult to develop the middle or end of a sentence in continuity from the beginning. At first sight there is some justification for the traditional solution of dividing the tasks of producing written language into three distinct 'subjects'.

Handwriting

Modern approaches to the teaching of handwriting to beginners are not too distant from the copy-book approach—except that the copy tends to be on a blackboard or in a workbook, or the caption on children's art expression. During the first two or three years at school children have been expected to master a print-script of separate letters—a style that must be abandoned or unlearned later in favour of a cursive script often very distant in letter form from printing. A tidy perpendicular form of printing has usually been preferred, despite the fact that a true perpendicular line is intrinsically difficult to achieve and maintain in a regular way. For some years a sloped printscript, capable of natural joining or running together, has been taught in New Zealand schools, and this seems a most sensible reform.

In practice it is fairly clear that two problems stand out as impediments to mastering handwriting. The first, as with any potentially boring and laborious task, centres around motivation and reward. By separating the learning of handwriting from its natural setting in purposeful expression, insoluble problems of motivation arise for the majority of children.

The second problem centres around questions of progression and approximation. What does writing look like in its earliest form and through what stages does it pass before becoming an acceptable, conventional script? The developmental answer to that, as displayed in such books as Marie Clay's detailed account, *What Did I Write?* (Clay 1975), is very different from the progression embodied in traditional school practice. In actual developmental studies we see a natural and continuous progression from scribble-like forms of play writing, through a very complex series of approximations and experiments each displaying the mastery of some new convention, towards goals which imply an understanding of the conventions of print rather than a simple ability to form acceptable letter shapes. The traditional progression tends to neglect the interlocking insights about how print embodies linguistic meanings, and instead moves directly towards acceptable letter form.

For those children who are unable to make the link for themselves between the apparently meaningless exercises in calligraphy to the fascinating purposes of embodying meanings in print, the traditional separation of 'printing' from proper language activity presents enormous problems of attention and perseverance. The extrinsic rewards offered on a narrow basis for approximations to 'neatness' not only fail as appropriate reinforcement but may actually misinform or confuse young children about the purposes of the task, and in

doing so cut them off from the sources of *intrinsic* motivation which are quite adequate to sustain practice and development at an efficiently high level.

Furthermore, as Marie Clay has demonstrated with detailed clarity, there are close links between beginning writing and beginning reading. In her own words:

For a preliminary period creative writing activities appear to be an important complement to a reading programme. In the child's early contact with written language, writing behaviours seem to play the role of organizers of reading behaviours (1975 p.3).

This is a subject which we will need to consider in much greater detail as we proceed, but at this point in our brief historical survey, it is sufficient to note the traditional fallacy of treating handwriting narrowly as a predominantly visual and motor skill rather than as a centrally cognitive and generative task embodying insight into the conventions of print.

Spelling: Lief wosnt ment too bee easy!

It seems rather unrealistic to talk about historical methods of teaching spelling—traditionally it was not taught, only tested and corrected. Much of the actual teaching of reading has always been handed over to children and in parents through the practice of sending the 'reader' home to be prepared, and in spelling this was *always* done. For several generations children continued to perform the ritual of saying off the letter names repeatedly in the hope that they would learn and remember how to write words correctly.

At least the fact that children were clearly required to *learn* to spell, and none was very clear about how such a 'subject' could be *taught*, finally drew attention to methods of *learning* as distinct from methods of *teaching*. This, together with the excusable difficulty of mastering the irregularities of English spelling, generated the first attempts to understand how children learn one of the language skills.

Some insights arose outside the educational establishment in 'memory training' hints and courses offered to the adult population as secrets to success in life. As modern psychology developed, one of its first popular uses was the provision of systems and strategies for improving memory, and as a notoriously difficult memory task, spelling received considerable attention. Perhaps in consequence of this general public interest, teachers began *teaching* children how to learn spelling and the problem became one for academic interest and research.

In the past fifty years considerable progress has been made in understanding the learning of spelling, leading to insights about individual differences of sensory modalities⁸ and learning styles (Schonell 1932; Arvidson 1963; Peters 1967). Stimulus was also provided by the work of remedial specialists such as Grace Fernald (1943) who pioneered the use of kinaesthetic techniques in both reading and spelling. The strategies recommended to children have become increasingly less mechanical and more functional, providing help to children in meeting the individual spelling needs of their written expression, and concentrating on words in the order of frequency of usage rather than phonetic or other traditional groupings.

Although these healthy developments have taken place (and helped to redirect the emphasis onto learning strategies and functional use in other language tasks) spelling remains a problem area. Recent research in the natural development of spelling generalizations [Elkonen 1971; C. Chomsky 1976; Clay 1977] provides increasing support to the idea that progressive approximation should be encouraged in the mastery of spelling. This notion, clearly

pointed to in the i.t.a. research, is so foreign to traditional ideas of correctness that it is difficult to see how opposition to it could be broken down. Paradoxically, spelling—which began the movement towards understanding the process of language *learning*—is likely to be the last aspect of language in which children are permitted to approximate as they learn.

Written expression

Why is writing such a bore? By the time most of us have left school a pen has become the heaviest implement we will ever lift. Those few of us who took any pleasure in the thrice yearly composition on 'What I Did in the Holidays' may gain some esoteric pleasure from writing, but for the majority of us, even if we have a book burning inside us, writing will remain the worst form of hard labour.

The difficulties of handwriting and spelling tend to impede and delay any genuine desire to produce written language for a purpose. Traditionally this difficulty is met by inserting a more manageable task—copying. Evaluation of progress and ongoing teaching are narrowed onto the ability of beginners to achieve an accurate, mechanical copy before true written expression is expected. However, the real drive to produce writing, and to wrestle with the many conventions involved, springs from the belief that some personal meaning is being permanently recorded—participating in the magic and ritual of print.

It was not until the advent of language-experience methods that any real attempt was made to satisfy children's aspirations to use the mysterious symbols of print to record personal meanings. The practice of writing from children's dictation, and then allowing them to experiment with reproducing a meaningful script, constituted a much more fruitful intervention than providing copy which had not been generated by the children themselves. Discussing an experience with a child or a group and then writing their comments as they watch and participate is another fruitful technique associated with the language-experience approach. This practice leads naturally to participation by the children as they begin to 'cotton-on' to the way print works, and provides ideal opportunities to demonstrate and discuss the undertaking at a level suited to the children's development. 'What do I write next?' 'What letter do we need?' etc.

Expressive language is a fundamentally *generative* process whether in speaking or in writing—a process that is centrally creative and inventive. Perhaps in the early stages children need to 'babble' with a pencil for some time before we should expect genuine print forms to be learned and explored. Certainly, the major written output of very young children in natural or developmental ways has tended to be regarded as of little value or significance in traditional schooling. If this behaviour were better understood, were compared from week to week for significant growth, and as strongly rewarded as the first attempts at spoken words are rewarded, then a quite new perspective on early production of written language would emerge. The progression may then appear as moving from inventive play and exploration to insight about the complex conventions—directional, alphabetic, verbal and syntactic—which characterize the world of print. The formation of letters and the mere ability to copy accurately constitute a deeply impoverished view of what is involved in mastering the production of written language.

Current practice

It is always difficult to identify major trends in the hurly-burly of here-and-

now. Many hopeful signs are in the air that lessons are being learned from mistakes of the past. New directions, guided by more realistic research of a developmental kind, embody a deeper and more sensitive awareness of what language is, and how its acquisition may be nurtured and sustained. These exciting developments suggest that answers to the perennial problems which we have analysed in this rather depressing historical survey lie in the realm of the possible. Many of these developments will be studied in detail as we proceed.

Before returning to the problems of the classroom, however, it may be fruitful to study the natural behaviour of pre-school children in the context of books and literacy. What constitutes readiness for reading and writing? Can reading and writing be learned in a purely developmental framework? What characterizes the early learning and experience of those children who become our high progress readers? What does the most healthy, optimal progress towards literacy from infancy look like? These are some of the questions which we will consider in the following chapter.