

VITAL SPEECHES

— OF THE DAY —

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Five-Year Economic Program for U.S.

LET'S GET AMERICA WORKING AGAIN

Ronald Reagan

Former Governor of California—Page 738

The Flexibility of Our Plans

STRATEGIC NUCLEAR POLICY

Harold Brown

U.S. Secretary of Defense—Page 741

Major Issues in National Health Policy

POLICY TO ENCOURAGE PRIMARY RESEARCH

Rita Ricardo-Campbell

Senior Fellow, Hoover Institution—Page 744

Is There a Gaming Industry

THE TRUTH AND THE CONSEQUENCES

William H. McElnea, Jr.

President, Caesars World, Inc.—Page 746

The Philadelphia Story

WHAT WORKS IN READING?

Samuel L. Blumenfeld

Author—Page 749

American Intelligence in the 1980's

THE MEDIA AND THE INTELLIGENCE AGENCIES

Stansfield Turner

Director of Central Intelligence—Page 753

Conservation in the 1980's

BUILDING A FIRM FOUNDATION

William K. Reilly

President, The Conservation Foundation—Page 756

Professionalism and the Corporate Bar

VALUE-NEUTRAL DECISION MAKING

Harold M. Williams

Chairman, Securities and Exchange Commission—Page 758

The World Is Very Different Now

LAWYERS MUST RESPOND TO THE FUTURE OF CHANGE

Robert L. Galtzer

Senior Attorney, J. C. Penney Company and
Co-chairman The National Conference on the Role of the Lawyer in the 1980's—Page 763

Generating Good Signs

THE ULTIMATE IN PERSONNEL SUCCESS

Richard G. Capen, Jr.

Senior Vice President, Knight-Ridder Newspapers—Page 765

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The Philadelphia Story

WHAT WORKS IN READING?

By SAMUEL L. BLUMENFELD, *Author*

Delivered at the 19th Annual Reading Reform Foundation Conference, Champaign, Illinois, August 11, 1980

EVERY so often the work of the Reading Reform Foundation is vindicated by independent researchers who hardly know that we exist. To me, this is all well and good, for it indicates that the teaching principle we advocate — intensive phonics in beginning reading instruction — is discoverable by others. It indicates that our stand is on the side of truth and that prejudice plays no part in our advocacy. We are against the look-say method not because we don't like its advocates, or resent their commercial success, or oppose primers crammed with gorgeous pic-

tures. We are against look-say because it produces crippled readers.

When Prof. Jeanne Chall's book, *Teaching to Read: The Great Debate*, was published in 1967, we hailed it as a significant vindication of our position. It said, in effect, that phonics in beginning reading instruction made better readers than look-say. Dr. Chall had come to that conclusion independently after studying virtually all of the available research on beginning reading instruction. But her colleagues in the International Reading Association — the citadel of look-say — took a dim view of her findings. The reviewer in the *Journal of Reading* wrote:

What prevents Chall's study from achieving respectability is that many of her conclusions are derived from a consideration of studies that were ill-conceived, incomplete and lacking in the essentials of suitable methodological criteria. In her eagerness to clarify these studies she allowed her personal bias toward a code emphasis to color her interpretations of the data. . . .

It seems rather odd that a researcher intent upon dispelling confusion should have allowed herself to be moored on a reef of inconclusiveness and insubstantiality.

So the Chall book, as much as it pleased us — which its author never intended to do, by the way — did not please the powers that be, and the result is that the reading problem in 1980 seems to be about as bad as it was in 1967. Some think it's worse.

Which brings us to the Philadelphia story. The remarkable thing about the study done in the Philadelphia school district is that it was conceived and conducted by people who had no axes to grind, no connections with any published reading programs, no links with professional lobbies, no stake in the Great Debate, no prejudices, and none of the bias that Prof. Chall was accused of having. If ever there was a group of researchers free of every possible taint, interested only in getting at the truth, this one was it.

Let me give you some background. In 1975 the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia published a critical study of the Philadelphia school system with recommendations designed to improve that system's educational effectiveness and cost efficiency. There were too many young people — especially among the minorities — coming out of the system without employable skills. The Bank wanted to find out what had to be done to improve the system's performance. The study, which took 28 months to complete, included an examination of school labor unions by the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School, a study of citizen reactions to public education conducted by Temple University, and a study of school finances conducted by the Pennsylvania Economy League.

The final report concluded that there had to be a change in the governance of the public school system if there was to be a drastic improvement in the education results. The public school system had to be insulated from the city government political influences in so far as the education aspects were concerned. Naturally, these recommendations caused a great hue and cry among the administrators, teachers' unions, and politicians. And, as you might expect, the recommendations were flatly rejected.

In October 1975, the Superintendent of Schools and the

President of the Federal Reserve Bank were invited by the deputy mayor of Philadelphia to discuss how they might reconcile their differences of opinion. The School District suggested that a new study be conducted utilizing the sophisticated statistical techniques that the Bank had used in its own study, but applying them to the District's primary educational concern: the reading problem. By collaborating on investigating an important academic problem, the Bank and the school system might be able to make some real improvements.

And that's how the Office of Research and Evaluation of the School District of Philadelphia got together with that city's Federal Reserve Bank to produce this very remarkable study entitled *What Works in Reading?* Key staff members from both the Federal Reserve Bank and the School District met in a series of half-day work sessions to plan the study. At the outset the tone was cordial but guarded, and the meetings were negotiating sessions as much as planning meetings.

The reasons for the earlier disagreement between the two sides quickly became evident. The nature of various school variables had to be clarified. In addition, differences in statistical terminology were a barrier. At one point, a staff member familiar with both multiple regression analysis and analysis of variance was brought in to "translate" the terms and concepts used.

As the work sessions progressed, they brought with them a heightened awareness of each other's world. Eventually a genuine mutual respect developed, which became the *sine qua non* for the implementation of this study.

Now, why do I burden you with this technical background? Why is it so important? Because it's essential to point out that the most advanced statistical techniques developed by economists were used in this study. These techniques have been designed to eliminate bias and error from such studies so that practical recommendations can be made based on objective results. Remember, Chall was severely criticized for evaluating studies that were "ill-conceived, incomplete and lacking in the essentials of suitable methodological criteria." This study could hardly be criticized in those terms.

Now to the study itself. Its purpose was to find out why some schools produced better readers than others, and why some students performed better than others. This meant examining the characteristics of students and schools that did best, worst and average. In all, 25 out of a total of 287 schools took part in the study — ten schools with the highest average reading scores in grades 1-4, ten schools with the lowest, and five schools in the middle.

All fourth graders in these schools — 1,828 pupils — became subjects in the study. Fourth graders were selected because the fourth grade is an important point at which to identify trouble: a sharp decline in test scores at this grade has been observed over a number of years. Also, it is the highest grade that permitted all elementary school pupils in Philadelphia to be potential subjects because of the way that city organizes its grade configurations. A total of 162 facts (or variables) about each of the 1,828 pupils made up the computer file on which the study was based. Later, various combinations of these separate items of information increased the total number of variables about each pupil to 245.

Five kinds of facts about each pupil were gathered:

1. Facts about the principal of the pupil's school.
2. Facts about the reading teacher in the pupil's school.
3. Facts about the pupil's classroom teacher.
4. Facts about the pupil's school.
5. Facts about the individual pupil.

In sum, an enormous amount of information was gathered on 25 schools, 25 principals, 25 reading teachers, 94 classroom teachers, 68 reading aides, and 1,828 fourth graders.

Now we come to the part of the report that is of greatest interest to us, and I shall quote the text verbatim.

Since the study was primarily concerned with successful practices in reading, among the most critical variables were reading approaches and programs. Approaches were included as variables in each regression run. The approaches are Specific Skills, Traditional Basal, Linguistic Basal, and Linguistic Programmed. These approaches represent all 12 commercial programs used in the 94 fourth grade classrooms included in the study.

The report then defines what it means by each of these approaches. Again, I quote the report:

1. The Specific Skills Approach involves different sets of recommended materials at varied skill levels, tailored to the student's needs. Materials cover the areas of decoding, study skills, comprehension, and literature. Various publisher and teacher-made programs are used in an effort to supplement basic reading instruction in the classroom.

Incidentally, out of the total 1,828 pupils, only 140, or 7.66 percent, were in a Specific Skills program. The program, as described, strikes me as a sort of Smorgasbord or remedial approach. The report continues:

2. The Traditional Basal Approach utilizes a graded series of "readers" as its basic component, with many supplementary materials. Beginning with the development of a sight vocabulary, basals generally feature controlled vocabulary and skills with emphasis on comprehension. Basals are usually identified by the name of the publisher.

In other words, the Traditional Basal is your regular look-say program. How many of the 1,828 were in look-say programs? In all, 1,124 or 61.49 percent. No wonder they've got a reading problem in Philadelphia. The Traditional Basal programs being used are Bank Street, Ginn, Harcourt Brace, Scott Foresman, Houghton Mifflin, McCormack, American Book, and — listen to this — Open Court. Why Open Court was included in this category will be explained later. Back to the report:

3. The Linguistic Basal Approach utilizes a graded series of "readers" as its basic component. The emphasis is jointly on phonics and comprehension. In these series, words are presented in groups based on sound-symbol relationships. Short vowels are usually presented first.

Only 175 pupils, or 9.57 of the total, were being taught by way of a Linguistic Basal — or phonics — approach. The Technical Supplement identifies the program as Lippincott.

The fourth category is defined as follows:

4. The Linguistic Programmed Approach is basically a linguistic approach with a strong decoding emphasis. The presentation of materials is in small steps

(frames). A response is required from the learner and immediate feedback is provided. Comprehension materials are used in conjunction with the program.

Apparently this is an approach that does not use basal story books. We are told that 389 pupils were being taught by this approach, or 21.28 percent of the fourth graders. The two programs being used are the BRL Sullivan and the McGraw Hill-Sullivan.

Now you probably want to know which system worked best, which approach produced the best readers. And here is what the report says:

Pupils being taught using the linguistic basal approach achieved distinctly better than pupils using other reading approaches.

In other words, the Lippincott program produced the best readers. Now I asked someone connected with the report why Open Court was lumped in with the other look-say basal programs. He told me that the approach designations were made by a reading expert at Temple University, and my guess is that the reading expert decided that Open Court could not be classified with the Linguistic Basal Approach because it begins by teaching some long vowel sounds. The linguistic approach invariably starts with the short vowels because they are the most regular. But actually, Open Court is as much a phonics program as is Lippincott, and the linguistics classification is quite arbitrary.

All of this is quite confusing to a lot of people, but I doubt that the professors of education care one way or another. Semantic confusion permits an awful lot of educational malpractice to pass for pedagogic innovation. Twenty years ago, before the linguists got into the act, there were basically only two clearly recognizable approaches: phonics or look-say. In look-say, children started off by learning a sight vocabulary. They learned whole words without knowing what the individual letters stood for. In phonics, children started by learning the alphabet and the sounds the letters stood for. There wasn't too much concern over whether you began with long or short vowels. Some people think it's easier to start with the short vowels, but Prof. Chall, in her book, made it plain that while she found the phonics approach superior to look-say, she found no evidence that one phonics program is better than another. Let me quote Chall directly:

I cannot emphasize too strongly that the evidence does not endorse any one code-emphasis method over another. There is no evidence to date that ITA is better than a linguistic approach, that a linguistic approach is better than a systematic-phonics approach, or that a systematic-phonics approach is better than ITA or a linguistic approach. Neither do we have any evidence to date that one published code-emphasis program is superior to another, although some undoubtedly are.

Incidentally, "code-emphasis" is a linguistics euphemism for phonics. The linguists have reservations about phonics because they object to teaching the isolated, irreducible sounds of the language as represented by the letters. Since the child does not hear these sounds in everyday speech, they don't think he or she should be taught them. But they agree with us that written English is a sound-symbol system and not one of hieroglyphics. So how do they teach the sounds? By using one syllable whole words in regular spelling patterns.

To me the linguists' objection to phonics is silly. They miss the whole point about phonics. In teaching the letter sounds we are also teaching the concept of the alphabet — which is based on a very great discovery: that all of language is composed of a very small number of irreducible speech sounds. You'd be surprised how exciting it is for a child to learn that English has only 44 sounds in it. Most children taught to read by look-say think that English is composed of thousands of sounds. They have no idea what the alphabet is or of the great discovery behind it. In all of my teaching and tutoring, I have found no child who could not grasp the concept of the alphabet once it was clearly explained and demonstrated.

Incidentally, while the Philadelphia report cites Lippincott — or the Linguistic Basal Approach — as the most effective, it does not tell us the order of effectiveness of the others. But I was told over the phone that after Lippincott came the Linguistic Programmed Approach, which was then followed by the traditional look-say basals. The least effective was the Specific Skills Approach. As for the look-say basals, the data showed no essential difference in effectiveness among them. In other words, Ginn is no better than Scott Foresman or Houghton Mifflin.

Now the Philadelphia report came out with another interesting finding that sort of puzzles me. The report says:

The linguistic basal reading approach was more beneficial to middle and higher achieving pupils than other reading approaches, but the reading approach utilized did not make any difference for the lowest achieving pupils.

I would want to know more about these low achievers before deciding that it really doesn't matter whether or not you use phonics or look-say with them. Why are they low achievers? Is it a matter of intelligence, or have some of them become low achievers because of their exposure to look-say? We know that many youngsters of normal intelligence are turned off by look-say and become disabled readers as early as the first grade. I wonder to what extent the investigators were aware of this. They were testing fourth graders. What were these kids like in the first grade? Were they taught by the same approaches in the first grade as in the fourth?

The report also lists other things that made a difference in reading growth. Here are some of them:

1. The better the pupil's attendance, the more the reading score increased.
2. Pupils who attended kindergarten seemed to gain more than those who did not.
3. Where the school's principal had experience in the field of reading, the pupils achieved better.
4. Where teachers had more pay periods without absences, the pupils did better.
5. The more minutes a week of sustained silent reading, the better the pupils achieved.
6. Pupils in larger classes (up to 35) gained more than those in smaller classes (as few as 24).

There were things that did *not* make a difference in pupil achievement. For example:

1. The number of times a pupil moved since starting school.
2. Being bussed to relieve overcrowding.
3. Whether or not the principal had a doctorate.

4. Whether the pupil came from a lower or higher income neighborhood.

5. Whether the school had more or fewer pupils from lower income families.

6. The race of the teacher.

7. The number of graduate courses in reading and language arts taken by the teacher.

But no finding is more important than the one relating to instruction approach.

The report leaves no doubt that phonics is better than look-say. It states:

Most interesting of all, the Linguistic Basal approach produces better fourth grade reading growth for students at or above grade level than any of the three other approaches used in the Philadelphia School District — Specific Skills, Traditional Basal, or Programmed Linguistic. *Probably no finding in the study was more robust.* Many, many alternative specifications were examined — Linguistic Basal was always associated with higher rates of learning.

Incidentally, the report itself does not identify the commercial programs. That information is supplied in the Technical Supplement. I would have never known that Open Court had been thrown in with the look-say basals had I not read the Technical Supplement. It is easy to misinterpret data if one reads the report only. For example, *Education USA*, an independent weekly newspaper put out by the National School Public Relations Association, told its readers about the Philadelphia finding in these words:

The linguistic basal approach to reading, a combination of phonics and the old "Dick and Jane" basal approach, is "head and shoulders" ahead of any other method of reading instruction in terms of achievement growth for pupils.

That kind of reporting is bound to confuse a lot of people. But I suppose it's too much to expect most people to be aware of the semantic traps in this business. I remember when I was writing *The New Illiterates* it took me quite a while to sort out the terminology, jargon, and professionese being used in the reading instruction field. I could give a speech on that subject alone.

As I said, back in the days of *Why Johnny Can't Read*, it was phonics versus look-say. But the look-say people never liked such clear, understandable terms, terms that parents could understand. So phonics became the "synthetic method," while look-say was called the "natural approach." Then the linguists arrived with their phonemes, graphemes, morphemes, coding and decoding. And look-say became "reading-for-meaning," as if phonics meant reading not for meaning. On the whole the look-say people liked the new terminology because it turned The Great Debate into the Tower of Babel.

And now we're in a new phase called "psycholinguistics," and you really have to keep up with the research literature to know what the opposition is up to. That phase was inaugurated by Kenneth S. Goodman in his article in the *Journal of the Reading Specialist* of May 1967, entitled "Reading: A Psycholinguistic Guessing Game." Goodman, in case you don't know, is the professor of education at the University of Arizona's school of education, who thinks it's perfectly fine if a youngster reads *pony* for *horse* or vice versa because he's reading for meaning — as if there were no

difference between a pony and a horse aside from how the two words are spelled. Goodman also happens to be one of the chief editors of the Scott Foresman basal reading program. So he has a vested interest in a commercial look-say program.

Incidentally, of the 1,828 pupils involved in the Philadelphia study, 272 or 14.88 percent of them were using Scott Foresman. Only 175, or 9.57 percent were using Lippincott, which suggests that there may be something wrong with the way textbooks are selected by school systems. That Goodman article, by the way, was published just four years after the Lippincott program had come on the market. Chall had given the Lippincott program high marks in her study. So Goodman's article was a means of attacking the competition. He wrote:

The teacher's manual of the Lippincott *Basic Reading* incorporates a letter by letter variants in the justification of its reading approach. "In short, following this program the child learns from the beginning to see words exactly as the most skillful readers see them . . . as whole images of complete words with all their letters."

In place of this misconception, I offer this. "Reading is a selective process. It involves partial use of available language cues selected from perceptual input on the basis of the reader's expectation. As this partial information is processed, tentative decisions are made to be confirmed, rejected or refined as reading progresses."

More simply stated, reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game.

There you have it in Goodman's own words. Watty Washburn, the beloved founder of the Reading Reform Foundation, used to call look-say "look-and-guess." He was right on target. According to Goodman, reading is a guessing game. Forget about the "psycholinguistics" nonsense. That's academic bull. Nor has he changed his mind since 1967, despite the continued drop in reading scores. In fact, Goodman is the leader of a new strong anti-phonics movement which is going to influence a lot of new young teachers who have never heard of Flesch or even Chall. I found the professor's latest word in the December 1977 issue of *Theory Into Practice*, the journal of the college of educa-

tion of Ohio State University. The entire issue was devoted to reading instruction and the lead article was written by Kenneth S. Goodman. Its title: "Acquiring Literacy is Natural: Who Skilled Cock Robin?" The pun is more than a joke, for Goodman's thesis is that we are killing reading instruction with "skill instruction," which is the latest designation for phonics. Goodman writes:

My approach starts where the learners are; it extends and establishes functional uses for written language; it employs *only* whole, real, relevant, meaningful language; it encourages risk-taking, meaning-seeking, hypothesis-testing.

Sounds wonderful doesn't it? Aren't you thrilled by Goodman's breathtaking concept of reading? It reminds me of one of those helium balloons that slip out of kids' hands and go soaring up, up and away. Actually, if you analyze what Goodman is saying, you realize that he is describing what a crippled reader does to get through a page of print. He takes risks, seeks meaning, tests hypotheses. In the end he has no way of knowing for sure what it is he has actually read. It's all a guessing game. Does Goodman find any place for phonics in reading instruction, maybe just a little, tiny place? Here are Goodman's words at the close of his article:

Too often in the past we tried to build technologies without a base in scientific concepts and understanding. We had alchemy before chemistry, astrology before astronomy, witch-doctors before modern medicine. Let's move on now from our reading skill technologies and relegate them to the museum of folklore and superstition in which they belong.

So now, according to Goodman, the only place for phonics is in a museum. Don't laugh. This is the man who will most likely be the next president of the International Reading Association. He represents the voice of authority at the highest level of reading pedagogy in America. Of course, someone should have reminded him that hieroglyphics came before the alphabet, and not vice versa. But I doubt that any such information would have the slightest influence on Dr. Goodman.

What does the IRA think about the Philadelphia story? They've remained strangely silent about the whole thing. So it is incumbent upon us to publicize the report and its findings as widely as possible. After all, if we don't, who will?