

Should the focus on reading instruction end in the primary grades?

Transcending Reading Teaching Methods to the
Upper Grades

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ABSTRACT

“Teaching Problems in Reading in the Primary Grades As Revealed by Aptitudes of Pupils in Blackshear and Douglass Elementary Schools” was written by Pearl James Holland, in June 1939. Pearl Holland was a student at the Houston College for Negroes, and wrote her senior thesis *“Teaching Problems in Reading...”* as a requirement in fulfilling the Bachelor of Science degree.

The purpose of Ms. Holland’s essay is to provide primary school teachers examples of ways in which modern teaching methods can be implemented in their classrooms. The main focus of the essay is reading comprehension and how instruction can be modified to meet the needs of all levels of learners in the classroom. Although her essay referred to non-contemporary methods of teaching reading, the prime direction of the essay was to look at ways to progress when teaching students reading.

Ms. Holland highlights several factors and principles for instruction of students and the use of tests as it relates to reading instruction. She determines that collecting information about background knowledge, student ability, providing motivation for students, and creating well prepared practice exercises are “necessary” to teaching reading.

The actual experiment focuses on two schools—Blackshear School and Douglass School. Both schools at the time, were entirely populated with black students and teachers-- as this was the time period that was prior to the Civil Rights Act, and integration efforts made in the 1950’s and early 1960’s. So therefore, race was not a mentioned factor in this study—Ms. Holland strictly focused on ability of the students and educators. At Blackshear, the study looked at many aspects and observations about

reading teaching and learning, but the main aspect that Holland's study looked at was ability grouping when teaching reading. At the Douglass School Holland's study looked more at pedagogy in different grade levels and offered a series of observations in different classroom settings.

Upon completing the study and gathering her findings from each school, Holland found that a reading teacher would benefit from creating a welcoming atmosphere or teaching environment. She also found the importance of giving content materials that are "simple and concise" add words to the student's vocabulary. Holland expressed that giving homework (referred to as "home study") should be in agreeance with the parents-- it should be noted when parent help is welcomed or not welcomed. She wanted parents to know their role in their child's success. And lastly, Holland's senior thesis suggested that teachers develop new interests in students as it relates to what we present and teach them in reading.

Pearl James Holland's study mirrors many ideas of present day practices in reading teaching (although she does not mention specific names that are used today, the methods are the same or similar—i.e. Reading Circles would be equivalent to Literature Circles, etc.). She closes her study by offering the notion that although traditional methods have helped many students and teachers, we should focus on more modern ways of teaching primary reading by having educators "...Point out specific skills and habits to be developed", "Suggest certain grade emphasis", and "...To show the amount of stress to be placed upon any one of the skills at each grade." In a time period that mainly focused on traditional teaching methods, and suffered from a lack of student centered

activities, Pearl James Holland's effort to pay attention and to note details from a student and teaching perspective in reading should be commended.

PART I

INTRODUCTION

When discussing student attitudes about school, cognitive scientist, Daniel Willingham, states "What has surprised me most has also disheartened me most; it's the difference in attitude between first graders and sixth graders. First graders are all basically happy to be in school. Sure, they get frustrated or bored by what they're doing, but when they do, their response is generally "I don't like this. What else can I do?" They are still game, still ready to go" (Willingham, 2010). Students look forward to going to school in the primary grades. Rarely do you come across a child who wants to voluntarily miss school in Kindergarten through second grade. Many students at this level are given a lot of attention, praise, and have the burning desire to learn at this time in their lives.

Of single most importance at the primary level, are the students learning how to read, and the forming of a literacy background. When walking through the school doors, they don't know that they are learning basic skills that will stick with them for this rest of their life. Reading should be a skill that will build and follow them through school, follow them into the job market, and assist with everyday tasks such as driving, grocery shopping, and even taking medications. However, there are "...44million U.S. adults who do not have adequate reading skills to fill out a job application, read a food label, or read a story to a child. These individuals often lack the literacy skills needed to find and

keep decent jobs, support their children's education, or participate actively in civic life" (Cooter, 2006). At one point most of those adults attended school, and *thought* they knew how to read, or were on their way. Our society is fostering generations of people who "...don't see school as a place of excitement and opportunity. They see school as a place where they fail and are made to feel ashamed" (Willingham, 2010).

"I hate reading" or "Reading is boring" is commonly heard once students reach the upper grades. "We have employed a variety of strategies and incentives, and, like Kohn (1993), we have found that extrinsic rewards were not effective at producing lasting change. Despite our efforts, we still heard negative comments about reading from our students" (Bauserman & Edmunds, 2006). The "...decline in motivation has been attributed to children's growing awareness of their own performance as compared to others, as well as to instruction that emphasizes competition and does not address children's interests" (Bauserman & Edmunds, 2006). With high stakes testing, and reforms that are taking education into many stained directions, we are finding that students are becoming "burned out" by the time they reach the upper elementary grades (in this case, fourth through sixth grades). Not only is the manner in which the way the government is handling education stifling student growth, it is hindering teachers as well. "Teachers are losing trust in their professional beliefs and abilities and their instructional creativity when faced with testing pressures" (Assaf, 2006) .

The issues within reading instruction and problem approaches in reading instruction has been a growing issue, and did not just come about with new reforms. The research into this area involves two principal areas. The first is a 1939 study of *Teaching Problems in Reading in the Primary Grades as Revealed by Aptitudes of Pupils in Blackshear and Douglas Elementary Schools*. The focus is on grades Kindergarten

through third, and how modern approaches may positively impact the students and their classroom environment. The second study looks at contemporary literature and best practice and how its ideas parallel the 1939 study. An in depth comparison will be structured concerning both studies.

The following research will compare Pearl James Holland's 1939 study to a comprehensive review of contemporary literature covering best practice in teaching reading in reference to teaching strategies, classroom environment, content, and specific strategies to use in each grade level in the elementary spectrum.

Through analyzing methods used in the past, and present day practice, a course of action to sharpen reading instruction for the future will be presented. The priority for reading instruction in the present should be to provide content that is student-centered and relevant to their everyday lives. Instruction should be differentiated and varied, due to the wide variety of experiences that students bring to the classroom. And lastly, the focus of this research will be to determine that educators should be looking toward keeping student interest in reading in the upper elementary grades by exercising the same enthusiasm, tenaciousness, and attention to details when planning lessons that is seen in the earlier grades.

PART II

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

In the 1930's and 1940's problems with reading pedagogy was not just about student and teacher relationship and methods of teaching. There was a much larger picture--the need for improvement of reading instruction and aptitude in this time period

was beyond the classroom. Segregation of facilities, lack of resources, repeated cycles, and obsolete ways to teach were of concern. Various studies and books discussed the need for library services for African Americans (referred to in the literature as “Negroes”) in the south, and how even the educators had limited resources and teaching skills due to the lack of exposure. When referring to an educator preparation as it relates to teaching reading in the south in the early 1940’s, a writer in the *Journal for Negro Education* states “The importance of providing the rural teacher with every means possible for improving her reading is two- fold: her own life will be enriched, and she will be better prepared to teach her pupils to read effectively” (Lee, 1944). Methods to correct the problem of teacher training in reading instruction, and lack of resources were difficult to find when looking for research from this time period, but it was not totally ignored. At Paine College in Augusta, Georgia in the mid 1930’s there was an effort to include training for future teachers by putting focus on a children’s library to help students become better readers, and to train teachers in the interest in students, and how to locate materials for their students. A children’s library opened in the fall of 1937 on the campus. “The class in elementary education used it to study the reading interests of children. The class in methods of teaching English, required of all English majors and minors, devoted six weeks to a study of book collections in small schools-what books to buy, and how to circulate them” (Bartholomew & Walton, 1939).

In June 1939, Pearl James Holland completed the study titled, “*Teaching Problems in Reading in the Primary Grades As Revealed by Aptitudes of Pupils in Blackshear and Douglas Elementary Schools*” as a requirement for the Bachelor of Science degree from Texas Southern University (formally the Houston College for Negroes). The study was a

collection of observations from two schools—Blackshear School and Douglas School located in Houston, Texas. The study was directed at primary grades (Kindergarten through third), and each school was located in the city (it was not quite considered what we would classify as present day “urban” in the late 1930’s). Blackshear had a student population of 985, with 24 teachers--eleven of whom taught elementary reading (Holland, 1939). The Douglass School population consisted of 1143 students, with 26 teachers—with thirteen teachers that taught elementary reading. The both school populations consisted of all black students and black educators.

Holland’s study at the two schools focused on the need to be moving toward modern teaching strategies and techniques in order to increase reading ability. Pearl James Holland stated, “Many new educational theories are therefore abroad to challenge the old. If changes are to be made, obviously they should be made from the beginning of a child’s school life, because the need of the child is greatest here...” (Holland, 1939). Pearl James Holland’s study stressed that the following are factors necessary in order to effectively teach reading: (1) Finding out background knowledge and ability of students, (2) providing motivation for students, and (3) having well prepared practice exercises. She also gave her opinions on assessment and construction of tests for students. She felt that tests should show proof that children are learning, educators should give tests that “...guard against a one-sided development” (Holland, 1939), and tests should be highly structured and specific.

The heart of the experiment for Holland’s study was a series of observations during reading instruction at both Blackshear and Douglass Schools. I will note that most of her study at Blackshear focused on the grouping of students, and strategies and lessons

to strengthen weak areas at the primary and beginning levels. She noted several strategies that were being used in the classroom, and suggestions of those that should be used. Though she did not use the modern terms “modification” or “curriculum differentiation” her suggestions of using special reading selections for those in the “slow group” by a teacher in the second grade, and “read alouds” (Holland referred to them as a Reading Circle) to “...get the children to cooperate and keep them interested in their work” (Holland, 1939). The use of student created picture notebooks and dictionaries (using cutouts from magazines and newspapers), cutting stories into pieces and rearranging them, promoting sound and “ear training” (Holland, 1939), and being exposed to “increasingly long word-groups” (Holland, 1939) were a few noted with Holland’s experience at Blackshear.

At the Douglass School, Holland’s observations looked more at indentifying problems at various grade levels—once a reading foundation had been started. The Douglas School focus seemed to be the maintenance of skills once students are able to read. Most interesting is that one teacher at the Douglass School did not have a set time to teach reading. She just “...watched for favorable opportunities” and then “suggested all to read a story” (Holland, 1939). Another interesting note is that Holland make note of teacher placement in the room during reading instruction, and modeling how to set up a classroom environment in which students are able to ask for help. On page 27 of the study Holland offered an entire page of strategies to use with students to help with “word attack” and “comprehension”. In one particular third grade classroom, the following problems were noted with student reading: insufficient vocabulary, students who can read

with little comprehension, poor pronunciation and enunciation, and little emotion while reading.

The study had a bit of a weakness in the sense that wasn't really true research that took place. None of the data collected was measured with an instrument. The data taken within the schools and classrooms were measureable, but the manner in which it was presented it was simply a series observations. Being that education was taken in such the traditional sense at the time, the arguments and suggestions would have been better valued with data showing improvement—rather than simply suggesting.

Being future forward, by focusing on academic mental development of students was a huge strength of Holland's study. However, though she shared the intention of knowing the child, student population and their habits, her study lacked data about the demographics of the school populations. With such a student centered focus on instruction, there should have been more information in the study related to the student body, and their academic performance (gender make up, siblings, grades, number of classes, educator information).

Her excitement of teaching, and getting students every opportunity to learn in the primary grades should be commended. However, due to the structural manner of the way this study was written, and the randomness of the observations, the reader loses sight of the true purpose of the study (which is tailoring instruction toward the needs of students rather than force feeding them past techniques that were not successful).

Lastly, *Teaching Problems in Reading...* was very creative in the sense that Pearl James Holland discussed methods of teaching that were very student centered—a manner of teaching that was still being challenged mainly by those studying sociology and child

psychology, not beginning educators. The need to make changes in reading pedagogy and to note them in literature shortly after the Great Depression had just occurred was brave, and cutting edge. At the time there was a huge focus on so many issues besides education. When Pearl James Holland noted her observations and wrote her final report to fulfill her degree requirement, it was probably not written with the notion that the same issues that plagued the two schools would still be of issue 71 years later.

PART III

THE CONTEMPORARY STUDY

Primary students in today's society enter school with a joy to learn that is innocent, and eagerly awaiting approval and direction from anyone willing to listen and help. They have no idea of the magnitude and power of the processes that their brains are building. "Those who succeed in becoming fluent, strategic, and joyful readers are not guaranteed success in school or in life, but they are well on their way. However, those who do not succeed in reading, or who become reluctant readers, face long odds in achieving success in school and life" (Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung, & Davis, 2009). Even if they progress and learn to read fluently, by the time students exit the primary grades (Kindergarten-third grade), that enthusiasm for reading begins to fade, and the students are simply left lacking motivation, direction, or goals for their future. Many students in the upper elementary grades settle for simply "knowing how to read", and have trouble when it comes to having to "...build a vocabulary of words and concepts as well as a vocabulary of cognitive and metacognitive approaches to texts" (Slavin, Lake, Chambers, Cheung, & Davis, 2009). Attention to student need and implementing a

variety of instructional strategies to spark student interest are needed to increase the effectiveness of reading with elementary students.

University of Virginia professor and author, Daniel Willingham found that “...studies show that show most academic time is devoted to Language Arts: in first grade, about 67% and in third grade, 55 %” (Willingham, 2010). With reading instruction, educators are giving our students a focused beginning, but discontinue once what was prescribed is thought to be enough. Reading impacts all other subjects—how does a student get an understanding of the content of other subjects if they do not totally grasp how to read? To answer that question, Willingham suggests that the students in that situation “...spends most of the day working on something that is unpleasant, unrewarding, and at which he feels a failure” (Willingham, 2010).

Reading instruction in the present day should include differentiated curriculum, content that is student centered and relevant to their lives, and pedagogy and curriculum structured in a manner which that does not change as drastically between primary and upper elementary grades. Those are similar strategies used with primary students in Holland’s 1939 study, and they should be used for today’s struggling and progressing readers.

Curriculum should be structured in a manner that suits the variety of needs and problems that face educators in the wake the divisions and gaps that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 have exposed. “...in every state, students enrolled in grades 3 through 8 bear the brunt of educational accountability. All states test all students at these grade levels in English/language arts and mathematics” (Anderson, 2009). So along with accountability, some of the issues and needs that have to be evaluated and addressed are

language barriers, poverty, relocation of students to different areas, learning style and teaching mismatches, and simply availability of resources.

When referring to reading teaching strategies, even back in 1939, Pearl James Holland states “Children should not be restricted to any one method of attack” and “Instruction in all these techniques should be given in some degree to children. Not all children will need the same amount of each type” (Holland, 1939). Due to the diversity of student populations (ethnically and academically) and the variety of situations that they bring to the classroom, educators must find their way by learning new techniques to meet their students’ needs. “For example, the teacher can demonstrate and then motivate students to emulate activities such as (*a*) acting out parts of poems, information books, and stories; (*b*) rehearsing and performing in repertory groups for Curriculum-Based Readers Theater; (*c*) participating in panel discussions; and (*d*) writing in response journals” (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2009).

Upper grades students will be presented with various new subjects and content that is more complex. Therefore, they should be presented with a variety of teaching and learning settings. “Intense and differentiated instruction that is data based and appropriately implemented can mediate reading problems” (Walker-Dalhouse, et al., 2009). In the upper elementary grades (fourth through sixth), the loss of the comfort of peer interaction and cooperative tasks, and becoming an independent reader becomes difficult if students are used to a variety of strategies and learning settings, and then suddenly in fourth grade, the learning environment totally changes. Hence right around the fourth grade many students feel “stuck in the middle”. At that point, some strategies for modifying or differentiating curriculum would be to use small group instruction,

having students create reading circles or work groups and discuss what they have read, scaffolding (breaking material into pieces and revealing it slowly), and most importantly implementing every opportunity possible for reading and writing connections. “Teachers can also increase the academic complexity for students by using strategies that include picture books, word recognition skills, intensive subject matter, vocabulary in a meaningful context, Readers Theater, and after-school activities” (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2009).

“If we expect young adolescents to prosper in their literacy learning, then we should give them opportunities to make and share meaning with their peers and teachers” (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2009). Students learn better with content that they can relate to. “Anyone who teaches primary grades will attest to young children’s fascination with the real world. Children are intrigued by nature and animals. They have a strong desire to learn more about dogs, cats, sharks, ladybugs, rain, snow, the ocean, the stars, and more. It is only logical, then, that their reading materials should reflect their curiosity” (Patchett & Garrett, 2008). Those same interests, curiosities, and desires do not go away in the upper grades.

In order to get students to be effective readers, educators must be able to somehow relate even the most farfetched stories to their students. In Holland’s 1939 study she states that when dealing with students and learning to read educators should “...help them bridge the gap between oral symbols they know and the printed symbols they do not know”. Such is the case with the content presented to students after they gain the ability to read. “When students have the power to control what they will be doing, they tend to put more effort into the assignment and take responsibility more seriously” (Samblis, 2006). Surely by fourth grade, most can read a story, but the comprehension and building of

knowledge begins when they are able to put themselves into the content, and in many cases see its value.

The focus on attaining certain reading levels in the middle elementary grades should be diminished or not stressed to the extreme that it is. “In the end, matching a student to an instructional-level text involves more than matching a student to a “reading level.” The combination of teacher judgment with the student’s background knowledge, motivation, and interests must be considered, along with the purpose of the instructional task” (Frye, 2009). The changing of pedagogy and drastic increase in expository text within the curriculum with this population of students should be gradually phased, and carefully implemented so that we are not damaging students’ self-esteem. “Children who have not yet done well in school need teachers and administrators to create a school environment in which they can succeed academically. To support this direction, teachers should provide an enjoyable and enriching learning atmosphere that helps students improve vocabulary, develop reading fluency, read for pleasure, and engage in related sharing” (Palumbo & Sanacore, 2009).

Sadly, “Given the nature of whole-group classroom instruction, many low-achieving readers in 4th through 6th grades (upper elementary) and above are asked to read texts that are too difficult. That is, they lack the requisite print-processing skills to be successful in reading grade-level narrative and informational texts” (Frye, 2009). So often the content in the upper grades are simply are repeat of what the students have already learned with just a larger vocabulary, or more content. Students need to feel challenged, but comfortably working their ways into new areas of reading. Perhaps

implementing and exposing the reading of different genres could also give students that ray of light that they are used to in the curriculum in the lower grades. “Pairing fiction and nonfiction, or other complementary sources, can build reader interest, present multiple invitations to engage with story, and expand ways of knowing” (Livingston & Kirkjian, 2004).

The laws of the land have attempted to change to make improvements in achievement gaps, and yet the curriculum and pedagogy have halted due to the stresses of getting everyone to meet the same goals on the same day. This grand happening of “success for all” doesn’t happen earlier (in the primary elementary grades) in their physical development, so why would our society and leaders expect that with their academic development?

Part IV

Conclusions, Recommendations for further study and References

Contemporary education researchers are expecting a lot out our students, with by far a far more complex set of indicators than what was presented in the 1939 Holland study.

P. David Pearson and several of his colleagues (Pearson et al. 1992) have synthesized years of research on characteristics of proficient readers and isolated seven strategies used by successful readers of all ages:

- They use existing knowledge to make sense of new information.
- They ask questions about the text before, during, and after reading.
- They draw inferences from the text.

- They monitor their comprehension.
- They use “fix up” strategies when meaning breaks down.
- They determine what is important.
- They synthesize information to create new thinking. (Tovani, 2000)

Are we proving them with the needed experiences and lessons to get the children there?

We are dropping students off in the middle grades without a clear sense of direction as to how to get to the next step in obtaining literacy. Suggestions and recommendations for the future study of reading instruction in middle elementary grades are:

- To give students motivation to read by creating and presenting authentic learning environments and application of what they learn.
- Assessment techniques need to be developed that foster thinking processes-rather than regurgitate facts and central ideas
- The addressing of pedagogy in the middle grades need to be discussed, evaluated, and explored in greater detail within the education community at the local, state, and national levels.

Reading instruction in the present day should include differentiated curriculum, content that is student centered and relevant to their lives, and pedagogy and curriculum structured in a manner which that does not change as drastically between primary and upper elementary grades. “Text becomes inaccessible when students” when they:

- 1) Don’t have the comprehension strategies necessary to unlock meaning.
- 2) Don’t have sufficient background knowledge.
- 3) Don’t recognize organizational patterns.
- 4) Lacks purpose for the student (Tovani, 2000).

Pearl James Holland's 1939 study states "If changes are to be made, obviously they should be made from the beginning of the child's school life, because the need of the child is greatest here; they are still largely at the mercy of whatever strong influence surrounds them" (Holland, 1939). At all elementary grade levels (primary or upper) students should be treated with the same care that is given when they enter the doors of the school for the very first time. This does not mean in the upper grades they should be babied or treated as if they do not know anything, but their importance and performance should be praised and molded regardless of how long they have been in school. The freshness of the classroom and instruction should be kept throughout the school year, and not just on the first day. Those jitters should be a reminder of how important an educator and a student's job is—no matter if it's the first day of school or the last.

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