
The Fourth-Grade Plunge: An Example of How Evidence-Based Adult Literacy Research Has Influenced K-12 Instructional Guidance

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In September 2002, The Partnership for Reading published a report authored by John Kruidenier entitled Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction (the report can be downloaded at www.nifl.gov/partnershipforreading). The report laments the paucity of research on adult reading and discusses how it draws upon K-12 research to inform adult reading instruction when that is appropriate. Missing in most of the recent guidance on scientific, evidence-based research for teaching children to read is any reference to adult literacy research that can inform K-12 educational practice.

However, the Spring 2003 issue of the American Educator, the professional journal of the American Federation of Teachers, an AFL-CIO labor organization for educators, has published a special issue with the title: "The Fourth-Grade Plunge: The Cause, the Cure". The cover of the special includes a summary that states:

"In fourth grade, poor children's reading comprehension starts a drastic decline-and rarely recovers. The Cause: They hear millions fewer words at home than do their advantaged peers-and since words represent knowledge, they don't gain the knowledge that underpins reading comprehension. The Cure: Immerse these children, and the many others whose comprehension is low, in words and the knowledge the words represent- as early as possible."

Inside the journal, the major article is by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., author of the best-selling, and controversial book Cultural Knowledge: What Every American Needs to Know (Houghton Mifflin, 1987). In the present article, Hirsch offers one approach to building children's comprehension ability in a section called, Build Oral Comprehension and Background Knowledge. The section begins with the statement, "Thomas Sticht has shown that oral comprehension typically places an upper limit on reading comprehension; if you don't recognize and understand the word when you hear it, you also won't be able to comprehend it when reading. This tells us something very important: oral comprehension generally needs to be developed in our youngest readers if we want them to be good readers." Hirsch cites a book entitled Auding and Reading: A Developmental Model by Sticht, et al (HumRRO, 1974-now out of print) in support of his statement. In an earlier book entitled The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them (Doubleday, 1996) Hirsch has referred to the limits of oral language comprehension on reading comprehension once decoding has been acquired as "Sticht's Law."

Later in this special issue of the American Educator, Andrew Biemiller, a professor at the Institute of Child Study at the University of Toronto extends Hirsch's point in an article entitled, Oral Comprehension Sets the Ceiling on Reading Comprehension. In support of his argument Biemiller cites a chapter by Sticht & James (1984) which includes an extended discussion of the concepts of "oracy to literacy transfer" and the use of listening assessment to determine "reading potential."

What I have found particularly interesting is that these articles cite research by colleagues and myself that was done as part of a program of research to better understand adult reading education, not childhood reading. Almost 30 years ago, to aid in the better understanding of adult literacy issues, colleagues and I wrote Auding and Reading: A Developmental Model to provide a summary and synthesis of how the "typical child," a theoretical abstraction of course, born into our literate society grows up to become literate in the judgment of other adults. This was done to provide a frame of reference for better understanding how it is that some children, unlike the "typical child," grow up to be less than adequately literate in the judgment of other adults and might benefit from participating in an adult literacy program.

The Auding and Reading book offered guidance for adult reading instruction that presaged the present guidance in the American Educator for K-12 education. For instance, on page 122 of Auding and Reading we stated the need for: "Methods for improving oral language skills as foundation skills for reading. In this regard, it would seem that, at least with beginning or unskilled readers, a sequence of instruction in which vocabulary and concepts are first introduced and learned via oracy skills would reduce the learning burden by not requiring the learning of both vocabulary and decoding skills at the same time. It is difficult to see how a person can

learn to recognize printed words by "sounding them out" through some decoding scheme if, in fact, the words are not in the oral language of the learner. Thus an oracy-to-literacy sequence of training would seem desirable in teaching vocabulary and concepts to unskilled readers."

The Auding and Reading book goes on to discuss concepts of automaticity in decoding, which underlies fluency of decoding in both auding and reading and why it is important to develop fluency (automaticity) of decoding for the constructive processes involved in comprehension by languaging to proceed either by listening to the spoken language or by reading the written language.

It is indicative of the rather long time that it takes for ideas to be disseminated and assimilated in a field of knowledge that this year the American Educator, which reaches a million or so educators, has brought many of the ideas from adult literacy research into the arena of K-12 education.

There remains a need for further understanding of the life span changes that affect reading. For instance, the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) indicated that as adults got older, their performance of NALS literacy tasks dropped. In research on the use of the telephone to assess literacy, colleagues and I found that we could draw upon the theoretical foundation of literacy given in the Auding and Reading book and subsequent research on listening and reading to assess knowledge development across the life span. In this case, we found that older adults knew more than younger adults about a wide range of subjects. We used techniques that did not overload working memory like most of the NALS tasks do. Because older adults generally lose some working memory capacity, we felt that NALS type tasks are inappropriate for assessing the literacy ability of older adults. Whatever the case, the fact that adults change across the life span argues for more research to better understand literacy development in adulthood beyond what we have learned today and what we can glean from studying the literacy development of children. Interestingly, as the American Educator for Spring 2003 illustrates, what new learning we acquire about adult literacy development across the life span may have additional, important implications for K-12 literacy education. This adds weight to the importance of policies that emphasize the need for research on adult literacy education.

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