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Integrating the Elementary Language Arts
An Historical Perspective

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In 1996 the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) combined forces—not, it must be said, without considerable professional strain—to issue *Standards for the English Language Arts* for educators, students, parents, curriculum designers, and policy makers in the United States (IRA/NCTE, 1996). The document was a milestone in the nearly four-century-long journey to connect the traditional four arts of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. But the *Standards* did more than recapitulate the arts of language. It broadened and extended the conception of language arts by adding “viewing” and “visually representing” to the mix of communication modes. In nearly every respect, it represented a revised destination.

In this chapter, we examine the long, winding road that led to the 1996 *Standards* document, with a special focus on the elementary years. Nelson and Calfee (1998) conducted an extensive review of two language arts (reading-writing connections) that included secondary and college education (see also Lindemann, 2010; Shanahan, 2006). But given the very different paths that elementary, secondary, and collegiate curricula followed in integrating the English language arts, we trace the road that has received less attention historically—the elementary age years—and is marked by more potholes, dips, and curves. Far from moving in a straight line toward a more perfect integration, travelers have veered off course more than once. Several questions form a backdrop to our discussion. At any point in time, who had ownership over what was being taught in the language arts? Why was the pedagogical and even national focus directed for so long at reading instruction rather than writing instruction? What kept instruction in reading and writing, those two sides of the literacy coin, apart for all those decades?

Here we concentrate on seven milestones on the way toward integrating the elementary language arts in the American context. These milestones—which take the form of a book, person, practice, or construct—represent significant changes of direction in the journey toward the 1996 *Standards* document: (a) *The New England Primer*; (b) Noah Webster’s spelling books; (c) Pestalozzianism and child-centered schoolbooks; (d) Francis Wayland Parker and progressive education; (e) the whole word approach; (f) reintegrating the language arts in the 1980s; and finally (g) where we are now, in the era of No Child Left Behind.

**The New England Primer: Sequential Teaching of Reading and Writing, 1620s to 1780s**

One immediate answer to the question of why reading instruction has been favored over writing instruction is that it is through reading materials that a culture conveys its value system to the young. The Protestantism of the early immigrants to New England in the 1620s and later naturally emphasized reading instruction, which would enable the young to read biblical texts for themselves. The traditional reading instructional sequence in the American colonies, as in England, was a fast course in Christianity: It began with the hornbook (which featured the Lord’s Prayer) and continued with a primer, the psalter (book of Psalms), New Testament, and finally the entire Bible. In New England, reading instruction was usually mandatory: By the 1670s, most New England colonies had passed legislation that required families to teach the children under their roof to read—but not to write (E. J. Monaghan, 2005, pp. 31–43).

A text indigenous to New England was the famous *New England Primer*, whose first extant edition is a Boston imprint of 1727. In its picture alphabet, the letter A is for Adam, and its accompanying couplet plunges straight into the doctrine of original sin: “In Adam’s Fall / We sinned all.” The next letter, B, for Bible, offers redemption through reading, not writing. Its woodcut depicts a large book labeled “BIBLE,” and the young reader is advised, “Thy Life to Mend / This Book Attend” (E. J. Monaghan, 2005, pp. 100–102).
The integration of reading and writing was not even a goal during the colonial period, for the order of the “three R’s” as “reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic” faithfully represented the actual order and separation of instruction for two of the language arts. Reading instruction invariably preceded writing instruction, partly because of the difficulty of handling a quill pen. Writing was defined as penmanship, the mastery of a series of ever more challenging scripts (E. J. Monaghan, 1987; Thornton, 1996). The only evidence of composition instruction in colonial America, other than Latin composition in grammar schools, came from British letter-writing manuals, reprinted in the colonies (Dierks, 2009, pp. 72–73, 143–152).

Noah Webster’s Spelling Books: Integrating Speaking and Spelling with Reading Instruction, 1780s to 1840s

Except for the syllabary (“ab eb ib ob ub,” etc.) and a few pages of syllabified words, the New England Primer does not present any full exposition of the relationship between the written and spoken language. To explicate this link, a genre of schoolbook emerged known as a spelling book (speller). It was not until the 1730s that spellers designed to teach young children were imported, reprinted in the American colonies, and added to the reading instructional sequence between the primer and psalter, where they became the most important text used to teach reading (E. J. Monaghan, 2005, pp. 213–231). Embodying the alphabet method, they presupposed that the alphabetical letter was the foundation of all learning. The task of the instructor was to teach children how to pronounce words (what we would call decoding) by naming the letters of the word aloud, syllable by syllable, in order to pronounce the entire word (E. J. Monaghan, 2005, pp. 386–387). The alphabet method was therefore a rare example of a unified approach to speaking, reading, and spelling at a time when reading was still largely an oral exercise.

After the Revolutionary War, the future lexicographer Noah Webster decided to write his own spelling book to replace English ones. Published in 1783, his first speller became a huge success, particularly after he revised it in 1787 and retitled it An American Spelling Book (E. J. Monaghan, 1983). Since the purpose of spellers was to teach pronunciation, the work succeeded in part because it was a genuine improvement over earlier spelling books. For instance, Webster helped children pronounce vowels by placing numerical superscripts over them. When he published a drastically revised version of his speller in 1829 (1829/1843), he improved his pronunciation scheme further by using the diacritical marks (such as macrons and breves) that most dictionaries still use today.

Pestalozzianism and Child-Centered Schoolbooks: Parallel Shifts in Reading and Writing Materials, 1820s to 1880s

Dating from the 1820s, a profound change was occurring in some educational circles in the perception of children and the vision of how they should be taught. The source for this change was the work of Johann Pestalozzi, a Swiss educator. Pestalozzi deplored harsh discipline and rote learning. He believed that children learned globally before they zeroed in on particulars and that teachers should begin where the child was and shape their instruction accordingly. His opinions, which received widespread coverage in the American Journal of Education, begun in 1826, influenced many schoolbook authors (Carr, Carr, & Schultz, 2005; C. Monaghan & E. J. Monaghan, 2010). Since the alphabet method was the quintessential part-to-whole pedagogical approach, both the method itself and the spellers embodying it, came under harsh criticism from reformers, who emphasized that children needed to understand what they were reading.

The most successful reading series to incorporate Pestalozzian principles was that of William Holmes McGuffey, who won almost instant success with the first and second readers of his Eclectic series in 1836. Breaking sharply with the past, his readers offered simple stories about children, printed in a comparatively large font and adorned with plenty of illustrations. As a cohesive and carefully planned set of six readers, the series set the stage for almost all future reading series (Lindberg, 1976. For McGuffey’s alleged plagiarism of Samuel Worcester’s readers, see Venezky, 1987, pp. 251–252).

Pestalozzian principles also had an impact, briefly, on 19th-century writing instruction. During that period, composition instruction, variously defined, was largely the province of colleges and high schools (Schultz, 1999). But in the 1830s, for the first time, authors began writing schoolbooks on composition that focused on young children’s writing and on their practice rather than on their learning grammatical or rhetorical rules. John Frost (1839) asked his young readers to draw on their own experiences for their writing: “Describe your own idea of a pleasant summer holiday” (Schultz, 1999, p. 52). Within certain guidelines, therefore, children took control, at least briefly, of their own writing, possibly for the first time in American educational history.

Francis Wayland Parker: Progressivism and the Integration of Literacy Instruction, 1880s to 1930s

One theoretical approach that always favored integrating children’s reading and writing was the constantly reinvented progressive movement (Shannon, 1990), which resurfaced in the late 19th century. By the 1880s, the progressive mantle had passed to Francis Wayland Parker, who in 1899 opened an experimental school in Chicago. His approach was based on meaningfulness: “Reading should be first of all interesting to the learner,” he wrote (quoted in Kline, Moore, & Moore, 1987, p. 143). Children would read what they themselves had dictated or written while teachers provided the spelling until children could do so for themselves. Once they had learned sight words, Parker encouraged phonics from his 21-page book of word
families—onsets and rimes such as *flour*, *hour*, *sour* (Kline et al., p. 147).

Parker died in 1902, but when Edmund Burke Huey (Hartman & Davis, 2008; Reed & Meyer, 2007) reviewed reports on progressive schools for his 1908 book (discussed below), he identified Parker’s Chicago Institute as one of the best of them. It embraced the philosophy of John Dewey, the leading figure in progressive education. Dewey had declared that play was the child’s work and school a preparation for adult life. “Thus reading and writing and drawing [‘visually representing,’ as the Standards would put it],” Huey wrote of the Chicago Institute, “are learned in the service of what the children are doing as a social community” (1908/1913, p. 300).

Huey linked progressive education directly to the whole word method, suggesting that the latter was “very little used in America until 1870, when progressive teachers began using it in various parts of the country” (1908/1913, p. 272). The widespread acceptance of the whole word as the basic unit of instruction was surely encouraged by Huey’s book, *The Pedagogy and Psychology of Reading* (1908/1913). Updated several times during his life, it continued to be republished yearly even after his untimely death in 1913 (Hartman & Davis, 2008). The whole word approach was also accepted by adherents of the scientific movement in education (Israel & E. J. Monaghan, 2007; N. Smith, 1965/2002). As the field of reading differentiated itself from educational psychology, the measurement work of Edward Lee Thorndike (Sears, 2007), who virtually invented educational psychology, became ever more influential.

**The Whole Word Approach: Disintegrating the Language Arts, 1930s to 1970s**

Adherents of the scientific movement believed strongly that basal reading series were the most appropriate instructional tools for teaching reading. Yet they and progressives at least shared one feature in common: a preference for the whole word as the basic unit of instruction. Both groups found the whole word approach liberating. Gone was the need to present only those words that could be decoded from the elements taught up to any given point. Gone were the restrictions on syllabic length that had been such a feature of the alphabetic method. Now any word of any length that had meaning to children was acceptable. For the new scientific researchers, whole words had an additional benefit. As the scientific movement began to quantify everything in sight, it was easy to tabulate, on the basis of their frequency, the words that children most needed to be taught. Between about 1870 and 1930, the date at which William S. Gray (Lauritzen, 2007) began serving as an author of the Scott, Foresman series, the whole word became fully accepted by adherents of both philosophies.

From the perspective of integrated instruction, the whole word had a harmful impact on integrating reading and writing, for it implicitly discouraged a key aspect of spelling acquisition—the ability to break down the spoken word into its constituent syllables and phonemes. Few people noticed that the whole word method embodied in basal reading series, even with the addition of Gates’s (see Sailors, 2007) analytic phonics, altered the teaching of spelling as well as reading instruction. It had long been known (e.g., Gates, 1922, pp. 69–73) that recognizing whole words from their context was not powerful enough to guarantee the accurate reproduction of their letters in spelling. But now the new spelling books, as they organized their content by word frequency or semantic groupings, unintentionally disguised the link between sound and symbol. Phonics “rules” were frowned on after a much cited study by Clymer (1963) found an accuracy rate of over 75% in only two-fifths of 45 common phonic “rules.” So in most public school classrooms across the country, teachers postponed the teaching of writing, other than having children form letters for copying purposes, until at least the second grade. Not until the research of Hanna, Hodges, and Hanna (1971) did it become acceptable among reading experts to talk of spelling as a rule-governed enterprise. Yet, theoretically, the link between grapheme and phoneme (phonics) is where we could reasonably expect the integration of reading and writing to begin. Moreover, while the whole word methodology integrated reading and viewing (“look and say”), it did a disservice to language arts integration—by again focusing so much attention on reading instruction alone. Claims that the approach also ignored phonics led to fierce attacks from outsiders such as Rudolf Flesch (1955). (For details, see Pearson, 2002; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001, pp. 10–31).

**Old and New Theories of Language Acquisition, 1970 to 1980**

Throughout all this, behaviorism, still in fashion since Thorndike, continued to be the prevailing theory in education. It reappeared on the reading scene with renewed vigor in the late 1960s (Pearson, 2002). Despite its prominence in the 1970s, however, the days of behaviorism were numbered. From 1957 on, Noam Chomsky published works that were to transform formal linguistics (1957/1969) by reintroducing mentalism to the study of language. This reintroduction reached the wider reading research community in 1970 with the publication of Harry Levin and Joanna Williams’ *Basic Studies in Reading*. Researchers turned from studying reading methodology to examining children’s comprehension. Investigators made striking advances in identifying practices, such as scaffolding, that would aid teachers to teach comprehension (Israel & Duffy, 2009; Pearson, 1985). But valuable as this work was, only some of its aspects, such as promoting written summarizing, fostered a closer integration between reading and writing instruction.

**Reintegrating the Language Arts, 1980s to 1990s**

In short, until the 1970s, approaches to integrating all the language arts in the elementary grades never became the
pedagogical mainstream. Up to this point it was the teaching of reading that had been the major focus of pedagogy, research, and public money (E. J. Monaghan & Saul, 1987). Yet important conceptual, political, and structural efforts toward integrating reading and writing instruction had already been made by several organizations. Even as early as the 1930s, a small group of educators had attempted to develop ways to integrate the language arts more fully (Hatfield, 1935; Weeks, 1936). The most prominent and persistent of these efforts at integration was NCTE’s Commission on the English Curriculum, which between 1952 and 1965 published five volumes on integrating the language arts (National Council of Teachers of English, 1952, 1954, 1956, 1963, 1965). Other organizations, such as the National Education Association (NEA) and the National Society for the Study of Education (NSSE) were part of the effort as well: NEA focused its 30th Yearbook on language arts in the elementary school (Hudson, 1941) while NSSE’s 43rd Yearbook concentrated on teaching the integrated language arts in the elementary school (Henry, 1944). The University of Chicago’s 23rd Conference on Reading focused exclusively on the language arts (Robinson, 1963). Each of these efforts embraced social conceptions of language and explored how the various language functions could be holistically embraced when teaching. Their impact was only limited and usually brief, but one of their strongest features was their encouragement of the integration of reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, however, a novel line of work contributed to illuminating the development of children’s literacy acquisition: research on emergent literacy. Language acquisition studies of children before they were exposed to formal schooling indicated that they were active in their acquisition of the written language (e.g., E. V. Clark, 1978). Precocious reader studies focused on the experiences of children who came to school already reading (e.g., Durkin, 1966; M. M. Clark, 1976). And literacy acquisition studies described in detail the emerging reading and writing behaviors of children (e.g., Clay, 1967; Ferreiro, 1978). Emergent literacy (Mavrogenes, 1989) received its first full explication in the seminal volume edited by Tcale and Sulzby (1986), who notably concluded that “Listening, speaking, reading, and writing abilities (as aspects of language—both oral and written) develop concurrently and interrelately, rather than sequentially” (p. xviii). This realization suggested that curricular and instructional designs should be shaped to support the complementary ways in which these aspects of language influence each other as they develop. In time, more detailed and extensive research suggested that children’s literate behaviors and artifacts included non-linguistic elements too (e.g., Yaden, Rowe, & MacGil livray, 2000; Short, 1992). These additional elements of communication—sometimes called “semiotic” tools (e.g., drawings, photographs, objects, graphs, videos)—were found to be integral to spoken and written communication, developing concurrently with print elements (Dyson, 1986; Suhor & Little, 1988). As we have seen, their importance was formalized in IRA’s and NCTE’s Standards for the English Language Arts (IRA/NCTE, 1996), which redefined the language arts as “viewing” and “visually representing” in addition to reading, writing, listening, and speaking. This extension of the language arts to other aspects and tools of communication came to be named, most recently, “multimodal literacy” (Lancaster & Rowe, 2009).

Drawing in part on the insights of emergent literacy research, three movements in the 1980s and 1990s became, synergistically, dominant forces in the discourse and practice of integrating the elementary language arts curriculum: process writing, whole language, and literature-based reading (Gavelek, Raphael, Biondo, & Wang, 2000; Pearson, 1992).

The concept of process writing worked its way downward from the high school level. The new research interest in writing may be dated back to Janet Emig’s classic study of 12th-graders as they composed (1971). Interest in researching the processes of writing mounted fast. In 5-year intervals, as recorded in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), we can compare the number of reading research studies with those of writing (E. J. Monaghan & Saul, 1987, p. 101):

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<td>Reading</td>
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<td>147</td>
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The rise in studies on writing in the early 1980s is striking. As Pearson put it, “In the middle 1980s, writing achieved a stronghold in the elementary language arts curriculum that it had never before held” (2002, pp. 446–447). Indeed, during the 1980s process writing became the “primary paradigm” for writing instruction in many states (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006, p. 277). Key figures in this transformation were Donald Graves (e.g., 1983) and Lucy Calkins (e.g., 1983).

The whole language movement was another powerful force for integration. Its most visible leaders were Kenneth Goodman (e.g., 1989) and Frank Smith (e.g., 1971). Advocates and observers of the whole language movement described it as a curriculum “integrated in the sense that artificial boundaries are not set up between any two of the four language functions…All are regarded as supportive facets of the same underlying cognitive and linguistic phenomenon” (Pearson, 1989, p. 233; Watson, 1989; Wilson, 1997).

And the literature-based reading movement drew together the four arts of language through means of policy and practice. The 1988 California Reading Framework, more than any other policy initiative, united authentic literature, activities to write about it, and opportunities to speak and listen to others when discussing it. Nancy Atwell’s (1987) In the Middle: Writing, Reading, and Learning with Adolescents provided for a generation of teachers an image of how to integrate the language arts through reading workshops.
Similarly, literature circles and book clubs rose in visibility, providing a means by which students could “interact using oral and written language to construct meaning about what they have read” (Raphael & McMahon, 1994, p. 103; Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001).

Where We Are Now in the Era of NCLB: 1990s to 2010

A major blow to language arts integration could have occurred with the fall from grace of both the whole language and literature-based movements. The late 1990s, however, saw an important professional shift. New voices (particularly the voice of Michael Pressley, 1998/2006) within the reading profession called for “balanced” reading instruction, arguing that the principles of whole language and explicit phonics instruction were not mutually exclusive. One important study observed six “exemplary” teachers uniting the two approaches as they taught their first-grade students to write as well as read, in classrooms that were models not only of language arts integration but of individualized teaching and cross-curricular connections (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, Morrow, 2001).

Just how far reading and writing researchers and instructors have come in viewing literacy acquisition as an integrated and constructive activity, one that demands integrated teaching, is illustrated by a review of the latest research on instruction in the elementary grades. Studies support the authors’ recommendation that “reading and writing instruction should not be isolated from each other” or from the content areas (Strickland & Townsend, this volume). Moreover, some researchers have taken a new look at reintegrating spelling into the curriculum. Bear and his colleagues have identified different layers of the orthographic system (such as alphabet, pattern, and meaning layers) on which they base their teaching of spelling with games that enable children, including non-native speakers of English, to infer graphic rules (Bear, Templeton, Helman, & Baren, 2003; Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, & Johnston, 2005/2010).

Yet a countervailing tendency to these integrating forces comes from another direction: national and state testing. The passage of the federal act known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002)—actually a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965—signaled an unprecedented increase in federal involvement in state education (see Shanahan, this volume) and an emphasis on high-stakes testing. Its major focus was once again on reading—just as it had been in the federal legislation of the 1960s (Hayes, 2008, p. 45; E. J. Monaghan & Saul, 1987)—not writing. The act’s requirement of state testing of all students from grades three to eight threatened to deprive teachers of their control of the curriculum. The consequences of their students not making the “adequate yearly progress” required by the act were so dire, even threatening teachers’ own jobs, that “teaching to the test” became inevitable (Valli, Croninger, Chambliss, Graeber, & Buese, 2008, especially chapter 6). Meanwhile, state testing of writing has also evoked criticism (e.g., Mabry, 1999). And it is still unclear whether the new Secretary of Education in the Obama administration will throw his weight behind the more repressive aspects of NCLB or favor a more progressive formulation (Price, 2009).

Conclusion

If we return to our initial questions, several answers emerge from taking a historical perspective. Ownership of methodology and content in teaching literacy was implicitly denied to both teachers and students in most of the periods we have discussed. Because reading instructional texts convey the values of a given culture and because we are responsible for conveying those values to our children, pedagogy had overwhelmingly favored an emphasis upon reading instruction over writing instruction. Not until we were prepared to value children’s self-expression (speaking/writing) as much as their listening to/reading the words of adults was the way opened to nurturing children’s presentation of self. We can glimpse this shift in the early 19th-century composition instruction of authors like John Frost, but more powerfully in Francis Parker’s schools at the turn of the 20th century, and in the “exemplary” first-grade classrooms of our own day. The consensus of IRA and NCTE that we should aim at integrating the four language arts and two visual ones involves a radical change of assumptions, perhaps the most radical in the history of American literacy instruction. These new assumptions, however, face recent and powerful external pressures like those of NCLB. Whether, therefore, the desired destination will be reached remains to be seen.

Notes

1. Short biographies of the following persons may be found in Israel & E. I. Monaghan (2007): A. I. Gates, by M. Sailors (pp. 327–346); W. S. Gray, by C. Lauritzen (pp. 307–326); E. B. Huey, by J. B. Reed & R. B. Meyer (pp. 101–139); and E. L. Thorndike, by L. A. Sears (pp. 119–139).


References


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