Chapter 1

The Nature of Literacy

History and Research Overview

Literacy instruction in the United States has a long, rich history. In 1647, the General Court of Massachusetts mandated that every township that had 50 or more families should provide reading and writing instruction for its children (Monaghan & Barry, 1999). Instruction had a standard sequence and a Biblical basis. The earliest reading materials were hornbooks. A hornbook was a large, paddle-shaped board, with the paddle portion containing reading exercises and/or reading material. Similar to today’s laminated materials, the reading material was covered with horn to preserve it. Students were taught the alphabet and common syllables, such as ab, eb, ib, oc. The hornbook also contained a prayer, verse, or other reading selection.

As Monaghan and Barry (1999) explained:

The colonial child began with the hornbook and then moved into a primer. After completing the primer, he or she would read the psalter (Book of Psalms), New Testament, and then the entire Bible. The Bible was considered the apex of the reading curriculum, at which all the earlier texts aimed (p. 5).

Oral reading and spelling were emphasized. Instruction began early. Children as young as three were provided with reading instruction. The main approach to teaching reading was the alphabet-syllabary method. Students were taught the names of the letters of the alphabet and then were taught to spell syllables: ab, eb, ib, ob, ba, be, bi, bo and then words. Practice materials included lists of syllables and text that incorporated the syllables that had been taught. One of the most popular texts in the colonial period was the New England Primer, which was first published in the late 1600s. Primers featured verses, articles, and stories focusing on the spiritual values of the colonists.

Spellers, which actually combined spelling and reading and were more secular in nature, made their appearance in the colonies in the early 1700s. Although the early spellers were
imported from England, after the Revolutionary War, home-grown spellers began to appear. In 1783 Webster introduced his speller. Originally entitled *The First Part of the Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, it was widely known as the “Blue-Back Speller” because of its blue cover. Webster’s speller incorporated a highly systematic syllabary approach accompanied by selections designed to instill morality and good work habits. Also included were articles about farming and other practical aspects of life. The Blue-Back Speller sold an estimated 24 million copies (Smith, 1965). Given the popularity of Blue-Back Speller and similar texts, a syllabary approach to beginning reading instruction dominated well into the nineteenth century. However, there were pleas for more holistic approaches.

Beginning in 1820, educators such as Henry Barnard and Horace Mann emphasized the need to provide meaningful materials and build on students’ interests. Reading texts were created that included selections thought to be of interest to children. The readers were also graded according to difficulty level. In an attempt to make reading more meaningful to students, Worcester’s *Primer of the English Language*, published in 1826, provided suggestions for pre-reading activities and also recommended introducing words as wholes before analyzing them into their parts (Monaghan & Barry, 1999). However, the most popular texts were the McGuffey readers, which were introduced in 1836 and were widely used for the next four decades, selling an estimated 120 million books (Smith 1965). Reprinted versions are still in use today. With the advent of the progressive movement in the late nineteenth century, there was a shift towards a word method of teaching beginning reading. There was an emphasis on reading for meaning and the use of literacy selections. Edmund Burke Huey in his text, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, which was published in 1908 but is still read by reading professionals, advocated a holistic approach to reading instruction.

**The Scientific Movement**

In 1909, Edward Lee Thorndike of Teachers College, Columbia University, introduced a
handwriting scale, which was published the following year (Smith, 1965). The publication of his scale marked the introduction of scientific measurement in reading and writing. Other scales and assessments soon followed, The Gray Standard Oral Reading paragraphs were published in 1915. A much revised version, the Gray Oral Reading Tests, Fourth Edition (GORT 4), is still in use. Gray also was a co-author and later senior author of the Scott Foresman Basic Reading Series, better known as the “Dick and Jane” series. Up until the 1960s it was the most widely used series in the United States (Monaghan & Barry, 1999). The series promoted the “look and say” method. Students were expected to memorize a basic series of words. Phonics instruction was based on an analysis of these and other known words. A key word attack strategy was using context plus the initial consonant, a practice that was widely advocated until the end of the twentieth century. Vocabulary was tightly controlled and words were deliberately and extensively repeated, since repetition and memorization played a key role in learning to read new words.

Chall’s (1967) landmark review of the research on phonics, *Reading: The Great Debate*, did indeed start a debate about the role of phonics in beginning reading instruction. More phonics began to appear in basal readers. However, both Ken Goodman (1974), who is widely regarded as the founder of Whole Language, and Frank Smith (1971, 1979), downplayed the importance of phonics. To Goodman, phonics was just one aspect of processing printed words. Students used three cueing systems: syntactic, semantic, and graphophonics (phonics). Phonics was regarded as a backup system if context didn’t work.

**The Impact of Sputnik**

In 1957, Sputnik was launched. Judging that it was behind in the space race, America began to demand more from its educational system. Although there was a focus on math and science, reading received renewed attention. In keeping with the principles of behaviorism, skills were broken down into their constituent parts and taught in step-by-step fashion. Programmed reading materials in print form made their appearance and were popular up until the mid 1970s. In
programmed materials, skills are presented in small, carefully sequenced steps and students are immediately informed as to whether their responses are correct. Many of today’s computer programs incorporate principles of programmed learning. Programs were designed for elementary schools students and for older students and adults. Some of these programs are still in use today, but are used mostly as intervention or remedial materials.

**Cognitive Revolution**

The influence of the behaviorists began to fade as psychologists began to investigate the workings of the mind rather than being restricted to observable behavior. One of the initiators of the cognitive revolution was linguist Noam Chomsky (1957, 1966). His theory that humans possess an innate capacity for learning language inspired Ken Goodman (1974) to postulate that reading acquisition was similar to language acquisition and that children’s propensity to learn to read was activated by exposure to reading and writing. Learning to read was viewed as a holistic process similar to learning language and so could be fostered by engaging in authentic literacy activities rather than being taught through a sequence of skills.

In the 1970s, an information processing model was adopted by many cognitive psychologists (Alexander & Fox, 2008). In this model, mental activity is broken down into attention to information, encoding and organization of information, storage, and output. Many of the reading processes are explained in terms of an information-processing model. The importance of background knowledge and strategies was also emphasized in the 1970s and 1980s, but, increasingly, the role of the reader and individual response were emphasized (Rosenblatt, 1978).

With the work of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and others, instructional context and the influence of others began to be examined. Reading began to be viewed as a social and cultural act, with meaning being affected by one’s culture and the setting and purpose of the reading (Gee, 2001). Approaches that involved group discussion came into prominence. As a new millennium
approached, the concept of literacy was expanded to include the new literacies created by the advent of the computer and related technologies and the Internet. The definition of text was expanded to include electronic media, visuals, and spoken language. Today literacy instruction features behavioral, cognitive, cognitive-behavioral, and social and cultural approaches. Response to Intervention, with its provision for progress monitoring and structured interventions has a behavioral orientation. However, strategy instruction, which has a cognitive orientation and discussion approaches, which have a social-cultural orientation, are predominant elements in today’s literacy programs.

**Research**

*The National Reading Panel Report* (National Reading Panel, 2000), which is the most extensive compilation of research in literacy, supports the following five pillars of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Although these are essential elements in any literacy program, there are other components such as writing, reading in the content areas, and voluntary reading that should be added. Also essential is the quality of instruction. In their study of highly effective programs, Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole (2002) found that the teachers who spent more time working with small groups and more time coaching students in the use of strategies were the most effective.