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"Meaning and Reading"

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Portland State University

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WILLIAM BURTON: If my style seems a bit cramped this morning, it's because they're recording this. That upsets my equilibrium. I might use a word I shouldn't use over the air, and furthermore my grammar always comes apart whenever one of these things [taps the microphone] shows up. But it was promised it's going to be edited.

All right, now as Dr. Phelps said, this business of phonics is very important; it's dying out a bit now, but there was quite an uproar, as you remember, after Mr. Flesch's book came out.[1] So I've been working on this for quite a while; I get up a new lecture every once in a while and so you're getting today a summary of some things that you know plus some other ideas. Now before I begin on phonics, I want to use two incidents and have you interpret them. These aren't original with me, but I'm sure they happened somewhere.

A little boy came home from school and was asked how he got along, and he said he didn't like it that day at all. Why? "Well, I knew all the words in the vocabulary, and I don't think that it was fair for the teacher to ask me to know the story also." [laughter] All right. Now, what's the explanation of that? There are two or three things that can be said. How did that happen? How did that happen? The two or three things to be said… No hands up? Maybe this recorder inhibits you too. I don't think you can be heard, I'll put my hand over this thing. It's bothering the engineers down there, I think. [chuckles] All right, how do you… what comment can you make? Kid came home and said, "I knew all the words of the vocabulary, I don't think it's fair to

[1] Burton is referring to Rudolf Flesch's book, *Why Johnny Can't Read—And What You Can Do About It* (1955)

have to know the story too." [someone in the audience responds off microphone] What's that? No, you can't tell about passing, though that's a perfectly good guess. I was thinking a little more narrowly; you're quite right, there might have been… no, he couldn't understand the story, but I think it's worse than that, I really do. Right here… [someone else in the audience responds] [quietly] That's exactly the point. He had a teacher before… probably, since this teacher's asked for the story, but some teachers… have emphasized the mechanics at the expense of reading… you get me? All right.

The other one is a little different, and I don't suppose you've ever met a principal like this, but a principal is said to have said to a third grade teacher, "Now look, any child who gets up into the 3rd grade can do 3rd grade reading. And I want you to see that they do." [laughter] Now what would you say if your principal said to you, "I want you to see if they do 3rd grade reading if they've gotten to the 3rd grade." What would you say? [response from the audience in background] That isn't what you say to that principal. [laughter] That's what you'd say if that principal weren't that kind of principal. Then it wouldn't arise. But what you would say is, "Yes, sir." [laughter]

Now, of course, your answer is quite correct; you would attempt… of course you wouldn't, but then that principal, of course he just doesn't know individual differences or anything of the sort, and at all kinds of levels, you know, there's a range of three or four… now, this third story has nothing to do with the topic, but I sort of like it, I think it's very funny. It does demonstrate something that came up the other day. This boy in junior high school had been taking one of the newly offered courses in French. He just couldn't learn to speak and read, he just couldn't learn French, he couldn't learn a language. Some people are that way; you know, some people can just pick up languages. In fact, I met a fella the other day since I've been here who speaks 7 languages. I knew at least one word in each of the 7, but that's as far as I could go, but he could rattle it right off. He just picks them up like that. He's not an educated man either, to speak of. Now some people can't, and so this boy just couldn't do it. And so finally his parents and the teacher had to get together and they talked it over, and the teacher kept explaining in courteous terms that some people can and some people can't, and explaining about linguistics, and finally said, "The boy just can't learn a foreign language and he shouldn't bother with it," and of course the parents were goodfully anxious, you know the type, who wanted him to do this thing, but finally—they were intelligent people—and they finally got the point and they said, "Then you mean that he just can't learn French? He can't learn to read, write, and speak French?" And the teacher said, "Yes, that's right. Now don't let it worry you, he'll be perfectly good at other things." So there's a moment of silence and the mother said after a while, "Well… isn't fortunate he wasn't born in France?" [laughter]

Now, that doesn't bear on today's lecture. I don't know how it got in these notes; it's always in here, but it does bear on what we're talking about. What does this show? What does that show? It shows the same thing: truthful explanations that can be given. [response from the audience in background] [muffled reply] ...the mother or the child? [audience member responds, speaker replies at the same time] ...the point I'm after… here is a case… [inaudible] he's only six. Every child [...] [BURTON has moved away from the microphone and is inaudible for several minutes]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: ...it's very, very… it's easier too, to learn a language, than it seems.

BURTON: How do you know?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Because [...] the muscles of the tongue and the throat, [...]

BURTON: [...] ...Now if you want to learn pronunciation, you learn it better with time; you get a better accent with time. If you don't, you learn the language much more rapidly [...] but you never learn to speak it well. [audience member responds] [...] [laughter]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I think that [...] had a marvelous sense of humor, and I think it's wonderful that she […] [laughter]

BURTON: I've never gotten that answer before. [...] That's really wonderful because it could be better… it could be [...] he didn't have any sense of humor at all. […] some people [...] being funny.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: What they need is motivation.

BURTON: Well, maybe I made a mistake asking this question this morning; [moves back to microphone] it's all right! You see, that's the trouble with a story of that type; you can't narrow it down to one point. What I'm really trying to get at is—granted that she didn't have a sense of humor—what comment can you make on the mother's remark, granting that she was perfectly serious about that, she was deadly serious about that! Yeah. [audience member responds] [chuckles] That, of course, is the point. Of course he will, but what about Mama? Mama said, "Wasn't it fortunate he wasn't born in France, he can't learn French." [audience member responds] Very good, that's on the point, maybe I haven't got a point here, I don't seem to be able to get it. [laughter] Right here. [another response from the audience] All right. Yes, I think that's getting closer to it. She just had no remote comprehension of the point you started to make over here about little children learning languages. She had no comprehension at all. She

looked upon it as a subject matter—you get me on that? As a subject matter. And if you can learn a subject matter, and if you can't learn it here, of course you can't learn it over there. Story wasn't as good as I thought it was, but that's all right. [laughter] Well, now, so much for that.

Now, in this business of phonics, I deliberately started talking about this some years ago because of parents' questions and pressure on the teachers about phonics. And there's a lot to understand about phonics, and I'm going to give you a quick summary of certain general points, and of course you know the details are to be found in the text in the manual and in your group discussions here. Now, what I'm going to do first—a little bit hard to do without all the charts—but in getting up this some years ago, I thought, "Well, I will go and see all the things that research has found out about phonics as phonics," do you get me? Phonics as phonics, over on the phonics side. Then I will find out what research has found out about children approaching phonics; there are two different things. Now, if you go through the search, you will find 14 things that are known about phonics… I'll give them to you in just a minute. They're in the book, so don't attempt to take them down.

There are 14 things about the nature of phonics as phonics which are important to know. And there are 5 things about children learning phonics, which we'll be getting at in just a minute. Now, if you look at phonics as a body of material, you'll find a number of interesting things. You'll know this. We found it out in arithmetic long ago, that some letters are much easier to learn than others. Some are much more difficult to learn than others. A certain order, a certain sequence will go better with most children, and then when you come down to whole words and sounding the words and blending, a lot of things turn up. Now just for fun—I'm going to read these off to you in just a minute—but for fun, the primary teachers might contribute here: what letters are the easier ones to start phonics with if you're going to discuss phonics with the children at an appropriate time? What letters or kinds of letters are the easier ones with which to start? Anyone want to take… what? [audience member responds] Consonants, exactly. The consonants, and certain, specific consonants. You start with the consonants.

Now why are vowels so much harder to learn—phonetically or phonically—than the consonants? That's an easy one, yes? [multiple voices from the audience] Yes, they have how many different sounds? Hmm? [audience member responds] Two or more… [laughs] what a safe answer that was, two or more, that's right. [audience laughter] But there are 30 or 40 total sounds to go with the vowels. So you start off with the consonants, and the easiest ones for most children are "c," "k," "s," and "t." I think "s" is the easiest, but those are grouped together by most of the research studies. Well now, here, I'm going to read these off rapidly, if you study the research on phonics, you will find, one, that single consonant sounds are the first thing to

start with and some are easier than others. The hard ones are "q," "x," "u," "i," "w," and "l." You'd expect "q," "x," "u," I think.

Now then, the second thing is that to move to consonant digraphs, you know what I mean, two letters that have one sound and so on. Then you can tackle the short sound of the vowels which is the common sound, the easiest one that'll match. Then the long sound of the vowels, then the final "e" rule. Most of you primary teachers know that… well, you all do. Then double vowels, diphthongs, soft "c" and "g": there's a couple of consonants that do have more than one sound. Then, the number of the syllables becomes important; division into syllables. Then we know if you sound words as a whole when demonstrating blending, it's much better than breaking it up into pieces; well, that would just be common sense anyway. Then, individual help to those needing it is always effective, and I'll talk about that a little bit at noon. Provide special periods for drill or practice, but after they've met it in a sensible situation, drill and practice should follow a use of the thing.

Now, the last thing, and this blends the two points—I've got two columns here—the last thing that shows up in the phonic research is that children should have discovered that reading is both useful and enjoyable before you ever, what? Start phonics. Now most of you see why it's very important. Because the parents demand phonics in the first grade in the first half, and I have occasionally met teachers since this uproar started who, in a discussion like this, say, "I will stand for no nonsense, I start phonics the first day!" Well, there are perfectly definite reasons why they are utterly and completely and wholly useless, and they show up in the other column over here. Children should have found out that reading is of some use, it's fun, it's enjoyable, before they ever saw any of the mechanics.

Now, I'm going to step over to the other side, as I say, I'm going to use two big charts here. Here's phonics over here. Now, what do you know over here about children approaching phonics? Well, the first thing that shows up in the research about children—most of you know this; I want to emphasize these—is that there is considerable correlation between the mental age of the child and phonic readiness. If you start phonics in the first half of the first grade, you will, with most children, be wasting your time and their time and setting up bad attitudes, because they are not mentally ready for this abstract thing; sound from letter and so on. Very little phonics needs to be given, and none of it in the first half, much. A little in the second half, perhaps.

Now, the research at the moment is going through an interesting phase. Up until a year or so ago, we believed that mental age 7 was necessary before you could really handle phonics. Now that would mean, of course, the beginning of second grade. The more recent research is

beginning to show that about 6 years 6 months, or 6 years 7 months—I see some of you nodding your heads, you're agreeing with that probably—shows that around the middle of the first grade it's safe to begin. The first point then is there's a correlation between the mental ability of the child and these abilities to get phonics. That just wrecks a lot of these arguments about phonics and gives you an excellent… of course you'd better go look up some of the studies, but gives you an excellent, courteous answer to people who want phonics the first day, and lots of it. Now, the second thing is the one I said puts these two columns together. Phonics or any other mechanics should be delayed until the children have found out this reading business is useful, it'll answer questions, it's fun to do it, and you can get enjoyment; you can get all kinds of just so stories and things and it's a lot of fun to read. Now at that level, the children will begin to notice the similarities themselves; they'll say, "Now, those two words begin with the same letter." *Mmm*, or *nnn* or *sss* or whatever it happens to be. They begin to notice. Now as soon as they begin to notice likenesses and differences and rhymes, then of course you can start phonics without a reason. In fact, they've started it for you.

Now the next point, this third point, is one in which you get in lots of arguments. There are a couple of people who write letters to the *Oregonian* pretty regularly; they come in every once so often. One is a man, one is a woman. The woman writes quite frequently and she's always sounding off about the terrible schools here in Portland. That may be true; down in Corvallis they're very good… [murmurs from the audience] but she's always making remarks about the schools. And one of her picks is at sight vocabulary. She thinks that's utterly asinine; you start off teaching children words right off the bat at the very beginning. This sight vocabulary is nonsense, and she told in one letter that her child learned to read off the cereal boxes. No, he didn't. No child can learn to read without what? The interposition of the adult, somewhere, to make the connection; do you see what I'm getting at? There must be a connection. Nobody on Earth can learn to read by himself. You hear people say, "Well, he learned to read before he went to school." That's because he laid on the floor and said, "Daddy, what does that say? What is that letter? What did this fella say?" And Daddy tells him. He notices the similarities in the sounds and away he goes.

Incidentally, just for fun—this is off the point for a moment—do any of you know of the only case anywhere in literature where a person did learn to read without the interposition of another adult? There's one… what? [audience member responds] *Tarzan of the Apes*. How did you know that? [laughter] I see the standard of literature is coming up. [laughs with the audience] Because audience after audience… you haven't been in one of my audiences before have you? No? All right, that's fine. [audience member responds] Did you really? Well, she should have an A. [laughing] In *Tarzan of the Apes*, the first book, there is an extremely ingenious account of how Tarzan the ape man found a deserted cabin and some things in it that

Europeans had left, and he learned to read. It's the most ingenious thing that you've ever read, except that I tell my classes it ain't so. You can't do it that way.

So, you have to use the sight vocabulary. And you all know how to do that. The child comes to school with several hundred words which he knows by ear, aurally, a-u-r-a-l-l-y. And then you translate him to an oral vocabulary and then to a sight vocabulary. In other words, he has a stock of words of which he knows the meaning, and knows by ear, and you make that a reading vocabulary. Now, the phonics is derived from the sight vocabulary which he knows, and he'll begin to notice the similarities as I've said. Now that is the place of course that Mr. Flesch's book… one of two places where it caused all the uproar. Mr. Flesch doesn't even know what reading is. He defines reading as what? Who knows? If you're familiar with Flesch and the uproar about it, Flesch made just an incredible blunder; of course he wasn't in school work, he's teamed up with Paul Woody now, and he's closer on the beam, but he made a perfectly incredible blunder, it's just incredible. How did he define reading? Do you remember he said… [audience member responds]. Word calling! You remember he was in a railroad car in Czechoslovakia and he picked up a paper and read off some sentences. And the fellow said, "Oh you can read Czech." And he said, "No, I can't understand it, but I've never forgotten how to pronounce it."

Well, now, he thinks reading is what we used to think back in the 90s. Word calling, word saying. Now none of you remember this, I think, but I do, where you were told to stand up and read, and that meant what? Stand up and read orally, saying off the words in a row, and you occasionally see that still. Well, that means they're still back on the pre-scientific level. So the sight vocabulary is the essence of the thing in the beginning. Now, as soon as you get that pretty well gone, the next point, the fourth point, is to point out important elements in the words. The kids themselves begin to notice words inside words, and things like that. And then last, of course, you always try to treat words as wholes. The emphasis being on the parts afterwards. That is Gestalt psychology, and here I want to make one of the most important points. I don't think any of you need this, but some people you deal with will.

You begin with words, your sight vocabulary; you deal with words and you derive from the words phonics and smaller words and parts of the words and so on. You come down from the word to its analysis. Now, I'm going to give you two minutes of history in a few minutes. But historically, phonics consisted originally of great charts called phonograms. They had families and helpers. You remember "m," "an," "m," "at," "man," "mat," so on and so on, and you learn scores, there are several hundred of them and then the other way they took "m," "a," "m-at," and so on, and one was families and one was helpers. And then they have all kinds of representations for certain pronunciations, for diphthongs and double vowels and so on, and

the children memorized all those parts. Now the theory was an adult, logical theory, which curses a lot of teaching, especially in the upper levels. If you know the subject elements, you can then what? Put them back together. But I worked hard for two days, and see, I didn't need to because you knew it. I worked hard for two days to establish that the essence of reading is what? Meaning, sure. And then you go from the meaning down to the things that help you get the meaning.

So that business of learning all those long lists of phonograms was the reversal of the way any human mind approaches any subject. I wish I can tell you about arithmetic, because the way a child and a primitive race approach arithmetic is one of the most interesting pieces of intellectual history, and then we take the adult version of arithmetic, which was developed by very keen adults, some of the smartest adults who ever lived developed the number system from the primitive youth. And we take that number system and give it to whom? The babies in the first grade… of course it's silly. Same thing is true here; those fragmentary things actually interfere. I think I tell this little incident in the book. I was observing a Boston school and one of the teachers there, and they still use some of those things in New England here and there, not universally, but quite a few teachers do because it began there and they were brought up on them.

In fact, I knew a supervisor who in the Beacon series… remember the Beacon series? Yeah, sure. Well, that Beacon series went out of print, and this supervisor ran all over New England buying up the old charts from the country towns where they were still in the school and bringing them back to her system, because she was convinced that was the way to teach reading. Well, it is the best way to interfere with teaching reading. This little boy in a Boston school was asked to read one of the charts—I think you remember the story—and he said, "Read that stuff? You can't read that, it doesn't make sense." That was a profound comment; he was exactly right about that. It doesn't make sense.

All right. Now then, I'm going to put four points down here for you in general covering all this. In the first place, if you begin phonics—I'm putting it negatively; that's too bad—if you begin phonics too early, you'll interfere with and probably lose the reading for meaning, because they get wrapped up, like my first story here today, they get wrapped up in the mechanics; in saying the things and so on. Now, the second point I haven't brought out, because it's brought out indirectly in some of these others. There are a few children who turn up who do not need phonics. They have a method of their own… not always do we know what it is, but some children manage to unlock words phonetically without doing it the way you and I have it in the phonics system. Now, if you find children who can do that, let them alone, don't give them phonics because it'll do what? [audience murmurs] It just confuses them; you end up with that.

The third thing: that phonics is only one of about a dozen methods of unlocking words. Only one of a dozen. You see, a lot of parents think it is *the* thing, and that was the impetus of Flesch's book. Flesch said, "If you can teach them some phonics, they can read anything." Oh no, they can't. There are 8 or 10 or 12 more.

The best single book on that little particular item of unlocking words and the different methods is Gray's little book *On Their Own in Reading*, which some of you have seen, I know. That is the best summary of these ways of unlocking words, and most of us who write books like mine, that is Bond's book and Harris's book and Russell's and the rest of us; we digest that stuff into a part of a chapter. If you want more than we give, you go to Gray. Now the fourth point, and I'll come back to this—I want to give a little historical summary in a few minutes—the fourth point is that this matter of phonics is not confined to the primary. Phonics goes clear on up through college in certain courses. There are many professors that know enough to use it. Now of course you can see when teaching a foreign language—that's what we were talking about a minute ago—it comes in, but in many other places, phonetic analysis or phonic analysis helps in some high school and college courses. It is not confined to Laura Gray's.

Now then, I've got a lot of things here and I want to show you them part by part. Now the next thing I want to show you is this. This is the extension of my two summers. Now what I did was summarize what research says about phonics as phonics, what it says about children and phonics, and then you try and put the two together. Now, when you write a reading series, you get a hold of a chart somewhere of children's characteristics; there are many of them, most of the books in child psychology have them, city systems have them, and so on. I have the one from Washington D.C. This is a chart which was made out by a teachers' group in Washington; it's for the benefit of everybody, parents as well, and it gives you the heading of “child growth and development characteristics and needs.” Now it takes approaching five years, 5, 6, and 7, 8, 9, and 10, 11, 12, and 13...now it says, "How do I look physically? What do I like emotionally? What other intellectual characteristics…" in other words how do youngsters act at ages 5, 6, 7—of course there's overlap—6, 7, and 8. Then down here it summarizes.

Now, as I say you will find many charts which tell you how children act and behave and why. Another very good one is a mimeograph form from Ruth Strang, who many of you know teaches college, a very able person in our area in education. She has written two columns, "The Characteristics of Children," and then over here, "The Educational Implications": if this is the way children think and feel and act at age 11, then you'd better do some of these things. You see what I'm trying to get at? Now, when you write a reader—readers for children, and they all go through this—I'm showing you mine because I'm more familiar with it. Then what you have to do is to attempt to fix your readers so that the things that they must learn, you know that

they must learn these things, they must be taught these things; and over here you have a child. So what you do is with a thing like this, you make out a chart in which you say, "Now here children just simply aren't ready"; phonetics happens to be the first one. They just aren't ready in the readiness book. They're not ready in the first pre-primer, they're not ready in the second pre-primer, they're not ready for anything in the third pre-primer. But along in the primer, we introduce in our series a little phonics, and these are the page references for the teachers; you can get these in the company. These are the page references for the teachers' benefit. Here's where phonics appears in this series: now you see it goes on and goes on; now when you get down—I'll take another one just to show you—oh, I got this one on sight too, just a minute.

Before you get to phonics, you have to make sure to get to what? Auditory perception, that's very important, and visual perception. Now here, we have all kinds of exercises here on the readiness book, and the pre-primers designed to either find out about or develop auditory and visual perception. And then as they get older and get along a little bit, then we begin to bring it in. I'll take just another one for fun here, to show you. [flipping through paper charts] Yes, comprehension and interpretation. Now the readiness book is very little and it's very simple, but you have to begin there. But look over in the third reader; it's just packed solid with page references showing the places where you with the manual may work for comprehension, critical interpretation, and things like that. I show you that for two reasons. First, to show you that the books do try to take advantage of the research and put the phonics and anything else together with the nature of the child. The second thing is to point out the care that goes into making a reading series, an arithmetic series, or anything else. Now, a lot of parents, particularly after a PTA meeting or any kind of a group in the evening, quite a few teachers with utmost courtesy will come up to me or the speaker and tell us what's wrong with the readers, and tell us how it ought to be done. Now, they don’t know anything about it because they haven't what? Spent 5 or 6 years figuring out how these things go together. Readers or any kind of a book, not just a readers or a textbook, isn't just written off, you don't just sit down and write it. It's quite a job to construct it. That is not my main point. My main point is to show how the two go together.

Now I was at a meeting recently—quite a large meeting too, larger than this one—and in the question period after I'd been 2 or 3 days speaking to them, and in one of the question periods a teacher said, "Which is the best reading series on the market?" [laughter] Well, I said, "That's an awful question to ask me." And I said, "Didn't you know I had one?" And she said no, she didn't. [laughs] Well, that's all right, you can't know everything. But I did make her an answer which I'm always pleased to make, and it grows out of this: you always wonder which reading series to use, and in Oregon you can use one of two or three, I think, and arithmetic. Now the

point is this: there is not today an incompetent reading series on the market. It doesn't matter whose you use. You'll get a good reading series. Now they'll differ in some things.

There, of course, is one series that most of the other writers agree isn't quite as good as the top 5 or 6, but they're all good. So, I wouldn't hesitate to use almost any reading material that comes to you from a reputable publishing house. It'll be soundly made and put together. Now, as I say, there are differences. The differences between the series are important. Each series has one or two or three points that it has done specially and prides itself on. See what I mean? In our case… I'll tell you what ours are, and some of the other people would have theirs. We have the lowest vocabulary load through the first three grades of any series on the market. Now we did that deliberately so that the slow child enjoys success, the slow child can read and he gets ahead, and he gets along. For a while we were a little bit alarmed that our reader would become known as the "retarded children's reader" because we got letters from all over America saying how wonderful it was with the worst children in the class. Of course we wanted to know also how it was for the bright ones.

We have the lowest vocabulary load. We have adjusted it very carefully to the children's characteristics, and there are 2 or 3 little points; one point very particularly is that we have four socioeconomic levels of children in the reader. Now, most of you know that most readers in the primary take a father and a mother and a dog and a cat and a boy and a girl, and carry them along through adventures. They go out to grandma's every Sunday, and the car never breaks down, papa never swears, a cop never stops them, and everything is lovely. Now, a lot of people have ridiculed that, and properly so. And so in our readers, we have three levels in the city and a rural group, and they visit among themselves, so that the children in reading find out some things about different economic levels of society and the difference between urban and rural life. That, we think, is quite important, and of course the other series, to be fair, to get at that, buy their supplementary books and things like that. But that ought to be in there in the first place, I think, we think anyway. There's something else I want to put in right there… now just a minute here.

Well, that has got away from me for the moment; I'll probably think of it in a minute. Now, I want to stress again with you before I give you a few minutes on the history, this matter of adjusting learning, particularly in the lower grades and also in the secondary as they're coming into college, the nature of the child. Now, I showed you the list of children's characteristics of growth: their intellectual, emotional growth, and tried to tie the readings in with them. I have here a set of characteristics of children tied in with music learning. This was made by the music group in one of the Harvard workshops. They were studying the teaching of music only, and they worked out first a set of characteristics of children at various ages, like these other

characters, and then they made a chart like this: this is the way children and develop, and these things can be done in music to fit here. I have several others here, I've got two or three in art; if any of you… do I have any art teachers or people who specialize in art for the lower grades here? Well, if you did you'd know Victor Loinfeld's books, which are advanced textbooks for you and for adults. And Loinfeld has the best analysis of art stages and their relationships with children's growth and development. Are you familiar with it? [audience member responds] Quite frequently. It's the best single source you can get. There's another one by Mrs. Mildred Landis, which also has two or three very good points, another one by a Ms. Margaret Mathais. But those three people actually worked out in detail how to adjust art: scribbling, drawing, figures, and schemes, to children's development.

I have started to make too, for my own benefit here—there probably is one somewhere, but I haven't been able to find it yet—language development. I want to see the stages at which I've only got thus far 8 or 9 points. How does language develop? Well, you know how it develops first, don't you? Inarticulate noises and gurgles, and then pretty soon it gets a little further and further and further. But mama thinks the little baby is saying "dada"; he's probably just gurgling, but there's quite a series there, and one for physical movement. Now there are quite a few of those, and as I say, they can be used to adjust the learning.

Now then, I'd like to give you just a couple of items, really partly for background interest. Especially in view of Mr. Flesch's book some years ago. Does anybody happen to know just off hand when phonics was first used in school for the purpose of assisting children to read better? Does anyone happen to know when that was? If you don't know you couldn't possibly guess. Does anyone know when it is? It was 1534. In 1534, it was a long time ago… [chuckles] a German teacher named Icklesamer developed a method of using the sounds of the letters rather than the names of the letters. Now there's another point that the parents get after you about. "Well, teach them the alphabet, then you can read!" I think that's one of the points I forgot a minute ago and tried to get in. Now, the alphabet just has nothing to do with reading. The words happen to have been made up of letters from the alphabet, but that isn't the alphabet's fault. [chuckles]

What I'm getting at is the letters, when being used in speaking—oh, you know this—they do not say the same things as the name of the letter. That is "g" doesn't say "gee," "d" doesn't say "dee"; if it did, then the word "d-o-g" would be pronounced "dee-oh-gee," instead of [over-enunciates] "dog." But the letters all have sounds; well, you know that pretty well. Now the interesting thing is this: no one did much with that anywhere except to follow Icklesamer in Europe, but in 1782, Noah Webster, who did the dictionary as you remember, came out quite vigorously, and he was the first man of his kind to say it. He said it quite sharply, that it's foolish

to deal with the names of letters, "a, b, c, d"; what you need is the sound of a letter to appear when you say it or when you read it aloud. Nobody paid attention to him, though he was right about that; that the sound is the thing. It wasn't until 1870 that anybody did much about it. Comenius, by the way, said the same thing in 1657, but those things hardly count because a lot of those boys could see way ahead and they could see the point, and he made the point long ago and nobody picked it up. And 1846, that's a long time ago—that's 110 years ago—one of the writers hit upon the word method. He said, "Reading consists of words, not the alphabet." He didn't say much about the sounds but he said, "No, it's words, and you study the words; you learn whole words first," and that's as far as he got, isn't that interesting? 110 years ago, he didn't make the next step.

Now then, one of those disasters happened. In 1889, 1890, a New England school teacher, Rebecca Pollard, developed this elaborate system of phonics which dogged us down to the Beacon series. She got out great charts, every combination of letters you can think of. She said, "You see, if they learn all the combinations, then of course what? They put them together in words." Which is the direct opposite of the way the mind operates. So that set us back for a long, long time. Then in 1920 the thing happened which gave Flesch his chance, and which many parents still hang onto. In 1920, there was a reaction against drill on formal phonics. Now, that extent was right. Drilling formal phonics on the chart is probably useless and in fact is bad, but of course a lot of phonics at that time wasn't doing that, but there was this reaction from about 1920 to 1930, and during that period phonics was minimized in schools.

Now, many people say that you teachers threw phonics out; they say to us: you professors of education taught that phonics wasn’t necessary. That never was true; phonics was never thrown out of school—oh, a school here and there maybe, but it was never officially thrown out of the schools—and no competent psychologist or professor of education ever advocated that. So it never was… it was badly minimized, because of the reaction against formal phonics. Then in the 1920s, as you know, it was the great period of research on aural and silent reading, and then the research on child nature, child study and adolescence, and those things began to show us a great number of things about people, and about how they learn to read. Now from 1928 on, the research is unanimous: you have to teach phonics. Phonics is useful, it cannot be done incidentally. It should be intrinsic. Now the real point is this: that the phonics is derived from the words and the reading which has already been used for what purpose? Meaning or appreciation, that's the function of the thing, and then you derive phonics. Now, of course, if you do it that way, the youngsters soon find out reading isn't simple, there are 214 different skills to be used when reading silently, and while you don't learn them all individually, I mean, not consciously, you do have to know most of it. It isn't simple, but phonics is one of the 214.

A great number of people like Daltch come along with a good deal of helpful material on phonics, on suffixes, prefixes, and so on, which they have derived from reading material. Even long ago—I'm not going to take the time to read these to you—but even long ago, 20 years ago, 6 or 7 of the principles I gave you a few minutes ago had been figured out by people even before the research came along; I might as well mention them. First is that you introduce them after the children have noted the similarities. They found that out long before the research had come along. You teach them important elements in the words by pointing them out. You teach phonic elements as parts of the word, that was very good for those days before we had the actual facts on the thing. You sound words as wholes; well, that's been demonstrated many times. Then you give individual help to those who need help with word recognition and unlocking and deciphering words. Oh yes, I'm glad I did read these, there's one here I meant to talk about.

You provide special periods for a drill working on recognition. Now, before I go ahead, I'll just take a minute on this. Is there anyone who wants to make a remark there who provides special periods for word study? Does anyone want to make a remark there? Two or three remarks? [chuckles] They won't get on the recorder so go right ahead. Now that is a mean one, and someone should say something. Provide special periods of word study. Are you thinking or just bored? [laughter; audience member replies off microphone] [BURTON replies but is inaudible] Now, that's the important thing: you will still see in many schools about the country word study, which they what? Study words in isolation, single words, they have flashcards, they talk about this word and that word and that word, and pronounce it and give the meaning and so on. That is of little value, except for bright children. Well, let's pull this together and stop it, so we can go to the coffee break.

Now the actual programs for teaching phonics, the actual specificity of teaching phonics, is of course found in the manuals that go with the reading series. It will be found in courses of study or teachers' guides. It'll be found in magazines. Incidentally, I should mention the *Reading Teacher*; I've seen Dr. Phelps carrying it around to various meetings. If you don't know that and you are teaching elementary grades, the *Reading Teacher* is an admirable magazine; it's just full of good stuff. They had a whole issue on phonics about 4 years ago, October 1954. It took up all aspects of phonics; the whole magazine was developed and devoted to it, and it's not a general principle, like for instance what I'm giving you today, though they have that, but they also go back down to teachers' accounts of how they do this and how they do that. All right. You can go to the manuals, the courses of study, and the magazine. Some of the yearbooks of the National Society and the yearbooks of the IRA, the International Reading Association, the same group that publishes the magazine, are awfully good.

Phonics is a basic method of unlocking words. It is inescapable, but it can go wrong. One, I'll repeat: don't do it too early, the children then lose the comprehension and get occupied with the mechanics and become word callers. Second, don't bother children who can unlock words without this phonetic business. There are a few, it'll turn up very rarely, but it'll turn up. Don't fuss with them. It is not the only method; context, pictures, experience, all kinds of clues come in and they are the same. Fourth, it's not in the primary grades only, it goes on up through the upper levels. Now, that's all I have to say this morning. Are there any questions anybody wanted to bring up about phonics? I told you yesterday we'd talk about this. I don't know, Dr. Phelps, what the chances will be after the luncheon for questions, but if you want to, okay with me. Oh, you've got a film coming up. All right. This afternoon. Well, tomorrow morning my talk will be much more short than these others on remedial reading, and if you have any general questions, bring them up, it's the last chance we'll have. Anybody got any questions today, on any aspect of the general background, principles and theory of phonics, they want to toss up here for a minute—I'll wait just a half a minute, and if you don't that's all right, but I'd be glad if you did have some. [voice in background] Excuse me, where is it… ?

[program ends]