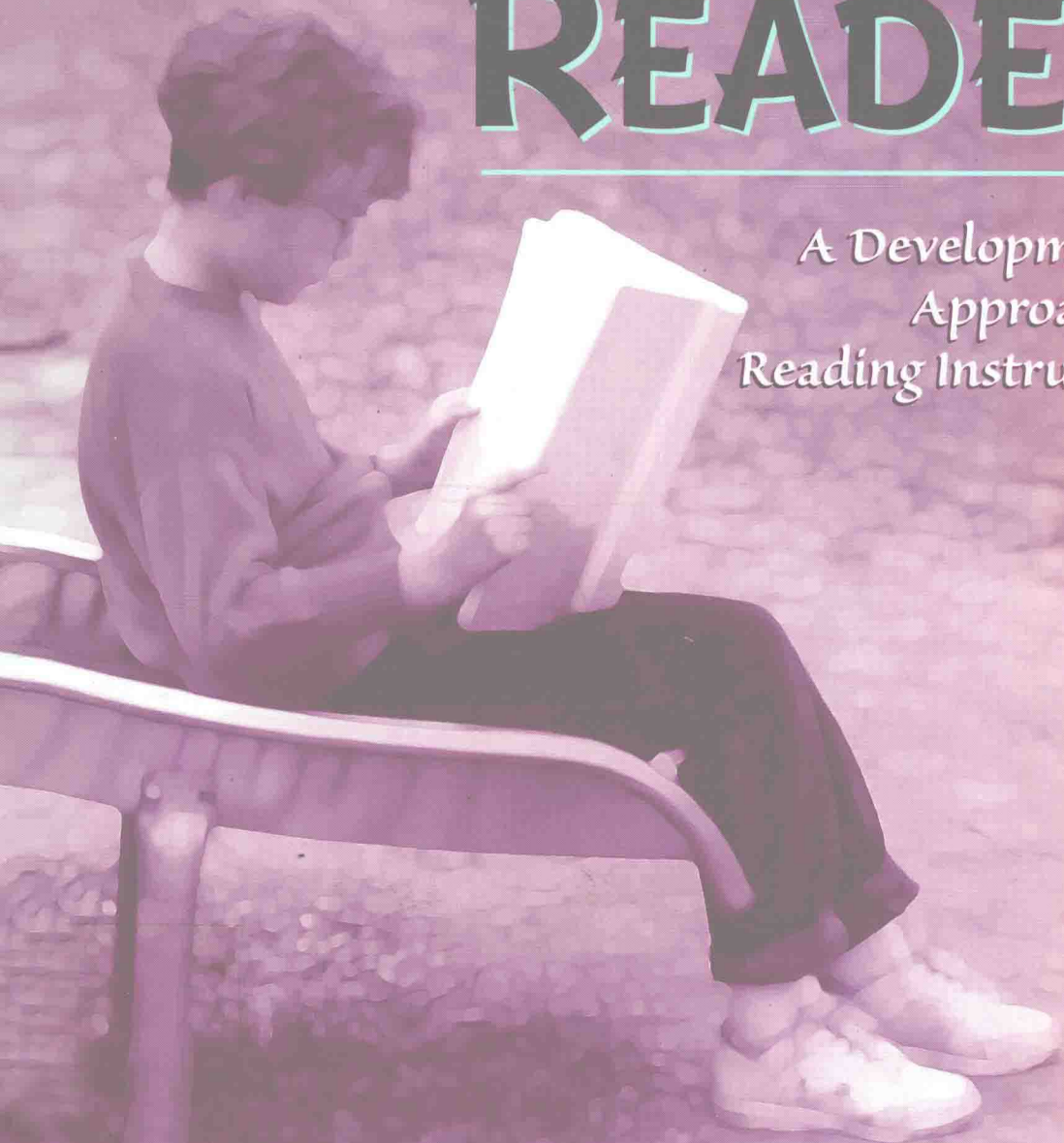


SECOND EDITION

BECOMING A READER

*A Developmental
Approach to
Reading Instruction*



Michael P. O'Donnell

Margo Wood

Becoming a Reader

A Developmental Approach to Reading Instruction

SECOND EDITION

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Becoming a Reader

Preface

Becoming a Reader: A Developmental Approach to Reading Instruction, Second Edition, is intended as a basic developmental reading text for preservice and in-service teachers. It has been our experience in teaching undergraduate and graduate students in education that a developmental perspective of literacy learning provides a helpful framework for understanding the process. We have found that most textbooks on reading methods are organized topically, with chapters on word identification, comprehension, study strategies, use of basal readers, literature, and classroom organization. *Becoming a Reader* is organized differently. We use a stage model of reading development to describe how children become skilled readers. Specific topics (such as word identification and comprehension) are discussed within this broader framework.

The text represents a synthesis of current thinking about how literacy is acquired. We have endeavored to produce a reader-friendly text by providing concise descriptions of the various aspects of literacy learning and instruction, supplemented by examples and case studies. To avoid overburdening the reader with lengthy literature reviews, we have cited only the most current and relevant sources to document and support the viewpoints presented.

As you read the text, bear in mind that we regard literacy learning as a language-learning process that is best acquired through the functional, purposeful use of print. The instructional methods we advocate reflect this basic premise.

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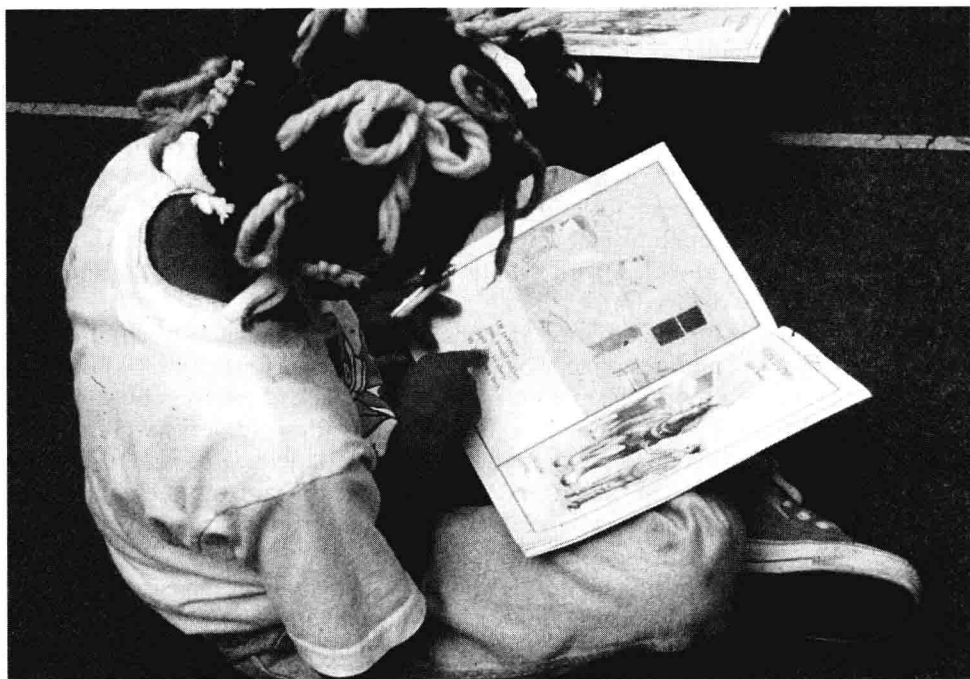
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Prologue



According to the media, Americans are engaged in a “reading war” (Vacca, 1996). Strident voices, both within and outside the education profession, are arguing about what and how to teach. According to Richard Vacca, a professor of education, “Newspaper coverage . . . has characterized the war as a bloody conflagration between the proponents of phonics and whole language” (Vacca, 1996, p. 3). Teachers and students of education are frequently baffled by this controversy. Is there a real dichotomy? Whom should they believe? What is really best for children? How can teachers decide? Where has all this come from, and where is the teaching of reading headed?

In fact, the controversies of today are not new. During the period from 1950 to 1980, reading instruction was dominated by the use of basal readers and accompanying skill-building activities. Students were grouped by ability and teachers were expected to adhere to teachers’ manuals written by so-called experts. In most classrooms, instruction was entirely teacher driven, and opportunities for extended silent reading of “real books” were limited.

Due to the increasingly rich mix of research contributions from the fields of cognition, linguistics, and child development, as well as education, the process of literacy acquisition became better understood. Two major understandings that evolved were (1) that reading is an active, meaning-building process and (2) that literacy acquisition is a form of language acquisition governed by principles that apply to all language learning. In the 1980s, instruction therefore shifted toward using meaningful literature instead of relying on basals. Teachers became more empowered to design instruction and to acknowledge children’s needs and preferences. Strategies for processing texts were likely to be taught in context.

Proponents of instruction based on these ideas identified themselves as *whole-language* teachers. Underlying premises of this movement were that reading is learned through immersion in meaningful, age-appropriate literature and that the process is modeled with whole texts. Systematic instruction and decoding skills were downplayed.

In some classrooms, an imbalance in the direction of child-centered curriculum and apparent rejection of systematic instruction in the skills and strategies of reading and writing sometimes resulted in lack of progress by students. The media and the public latched on to the problems these students were encountering and blamed whole-language instruction. Whole-language became the scapegoat for an array of literacy problems, regardless of circumstances or actual teaching practices. The fact that many children were benefiting from instruction based on whole-language philosophy was largely ignored.

A countermovement developed that heavily emphasized phonics instruction and the literal interpretation of texts (Weaver, 1994). This group was very vocal and politically active in support of its agenda: to give phonics instruction the central role in the teaching of reading. Purist proponents of phonics-based instruction went so far as to claim that the use of meaningful stories in early reading instruction actually impaired students’ progress. They proposed that students should, instead, practice reading only decodable texts that are contrived to include only phonic elements that have been explicitly taught. Because this view reduces the complexity of literacy acquisition to a simplistic explanation, it has attracted many followers.

It should be noted that this controversy is focused primarily on decoding and literal comprehension—the most rudimentary beginnings of reading. What is our goal, as teachers? What is literacy? In her book *Transitions from Literature to Literacy* (1988), Regie Routman describes genuine literacy as “using reading, writing, thinking, and speaking daily in the real world, with options, appreciation, and meaningful purposes in various settings and with other people. An actively literate person is constantly thinking, learning, and reflecting, and is assuming the responsibility for continued growth in personal literacy” (Routman, 1988, p. 15). She goes on to say that the way we teach reading and writing in school is critical to the development of genuine, active literacy.

In fact, national tests show that from 1950 to the present, standardized test scores in reading have actually increased, based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, which is administered regularly to fourth-, eighth-, and eleventh-graders across the country. The scores indicate gains in decoding and literal comprehension. However, U.S. students do not fare well at integrating and applying knowledge (Routman, 1996). Society is moving toward an increasing need for critical and analytical literacy; therefore, the data point to the following critical instructional needs:

- An increase in total reading instruction for all students
 - More experience with challenging texts
 - More opportunities to critically analyze and synthesize information from multiple sources
 - Attention to increasing meaning vocabulary at all grade levels
- (Routman, 1996)

The answers to the questions about effective teaching of reading are not found in the extremes. Effective teachers do not embrace fads or extreme positions. Rather, they recognize the need for balance between the study of the structure of printed language and meaningful encounters with whole texts. In David Pearson's words, they need to “reclaim the center” (Pearson, 1996). They also recognize the need for instruction to extend beyond decoding and literal comprehension. This book is intended to present a balanced perspective of how children become readers and to focus on practices that contribute to real literacy.

As always, the challenge facing educators is to translate theoretical knowledge into viable classroom practice. What qualities characterize teachers who have succeeded in designing effective literacy programs? They have usually participated in high-quality in-service programs, courses, and workshops. They have developed a knowledge base that enables them to make sound instructional decisions. They are astute observers, always watching, listening, and responding to their students. There is a pervasive atmosphere of enthusiasm and excitement about reading and writing in their classrooms, and both they and their students have high expectations for success. Their perspective of the literacy process transcends age and grade-level considerations and frees them from dependence on the rigid prescriptions of teachers' manuals. How do teachers acquire such a perspective?

A basic principle of comprehension is that information must be organized and classified by the learner if it is to be understood, remembered, and used. Our goal in

writing this text is to organize the current body of knowledge about readers' development and reading instruction in an understandable and coherent manner. We have found in our work with both prospective and experienced teachers that establishing a framework for understanding the reading process helps them greatly in using the information they acquire to plan appropriate instruction. The framework we will present is based on the fact that learning to read is a developmental process.

Stages of Literacy Development

Literacy acquisition is continuous; however, distinct stages of reading growth can be discerned as students gradually become proficient readers. Initially, children must acquire an understanding of the nature and purpose of print. As they progress from generic understandings and rough approximations to more conventional uses of print, they begin to identify words in their printed form. Extensive reading practice leads to automatic recognition of a sizable number of words. Readers begin to encounter more concepts and ideas that transcend their experience. Further growth involves relating what is new to what is known in order to understand and use what is read.

This pattern has been described by various writers (Betts, 1957; Chall, 1983; O'Donnell, 1979; Powell, 1977) as consisting of a sequence of developmental stages. There is considerable similarity among these descriptions. Our particular designation of stages of reading progress is based on our own observations and many teachers' reports of children's reading growth, as well as the literature and research relating to literacy acquisition. We present five discernible stages of reading development; these stages form the basis for the organization of the text. It should be noted that these stages do not necessarily correlate with age or grade levels. However, general grade-level equivalents are cited in the following stage descriptions to give a sense of typical literacy development.

Stage I: Emergent Reading

Recent studies of young children indicate that a basic set for literacy must be acquired before they can begin to accurately match speech to print. Concepts relating to printed language—what it is for, how it is used, how it relates to speech—must be promoted through extensive modeling and meaningful experiences with the printed word. Emergent readers are extending their concepts of the world around them. Other significant features of this stage are extension of oral language facility and expansion of concepts and classification ability. As a consequence of appropriate literacy experiences, children will acquire those characteristics that form the foundations of further literacy development: They will seek and enjoy experiences with print, they will become familiar with the language of literature, they will understand and follow the sequence of stories read to them and will imitate reading on their own, they will begin to acquire some specific understandings of the nature and purpose of print, and they will see themselves as developing readers and writers. Most preschoolers and kindergartners are in the emergent reading stage.