

---

# Developing Professional Teachers: Encouraging Change and Inquiry

*Bernard L. Hayes*

---

(This paper is one of a series on the topic  
"Changing Classroom Practices: Roadblocks and Detours")

In this discussion of how to encourage change and inquiry among preservice teachers, what I describe is more a goal than a reality—more an approach than a program. But I would like to share some thinking that forms the basis for much of what I try to do in my reading class.

Basically I, like many other teacher educators, take the position that controversies regarding the teaching of reading remain and are not likely to disappear. But teachers can make a difference regardless of the theoretical position they take on these issues. Most studies are unable to determine whether this or that method makes a difference, but few studies fail to establish that the teacher makes a difference. If teachers will take the time to review their own beliefs and to develop practices based on those beliefs, children will learn to read. Frank Smith has addressed this concern when he states that

Many teachers are trained to be ignorant, to rely on the opinions of experts or supervisors rather than on their own good judgment. The questions I am asked after lectures to teachers [on the topic of reading] are always eminently practical—how should reading be taught, which method is best, and what should be done about a real-life child of eight who has the devastating misfortune to read like a statistically fictitious child of six? Teachers do not ask the right kind of questions—instead of asking what they should do. . . , they should ask what they need to know in order to decide for themselves. . . .

However, for teachers to "decide for themselves," it will require an understanding of the power they possess and a willingness to use that

power. They must also be aware of the obstacles that stand in the way of their effective use of such power. I agree with Otto (1988) that we are unlikely to unseat the three Apocalyptic horsemen: basal readers, graded schools, and standardized achievement tests. However, if we are going to remove them as major roadblocks to positive change in teachers' exercise of power, they must be confronted in some way. An understanding of the role these three factors, particularly commercial materials, may play as obstacles can best be seen as preservice teachers examine their preconceptions and misconceptions of how they contribute to effective reading instruction.

In discussing how these factors may prevent teachers from assuming a more professional role, I will address two important conditions that Otto suggests ought to happen with teachers if they are to become more professional. One, they must unshackle themselves from commercial reading material; and two, they must become more tolerant of ambiguity.

### **Changing Belief and Values**

One faces two types of problems when working with preservice teachers in reading: those that relate to values and beliefs and those that relate to skills and knowledge. While these problems are related, I will discuss them separately, to provide an overview of much of what I believe must be done if teachers are going to accept the responsibility to decide what happens in their own classroom.

Teachers' beliefs and values are critical to the success of the reading program. Teachers must believe that they are capable of helping each student acquire the essentials of reading. They must feel that student failure is not acceptable and that student success and failure depend largely on what happens in their classrooms. However, if what happens in their classroom is controlled by basal readers and standardized tests, many children will continue to fail.

It is my opinion that preservice teachers have many conceptions regarding these areas. My impressions are gleaned from both my own experiences in working with teachers and from studies of elementary reading instruction: (1) teachers believe that commercial reading materials can teach students to read (Austin & Morrison, 1963); (2) teachers believe that the materials embody scientific truth (Barton & Wilder, 1964); and (3) teachers think that they are fulfilling administrative expectations when they use these materials (Chall, 1967). The strong influence of these beliefs regarding basal readers and standardized tests prevent many preservice teachers from "unshackling"

themselves in order to exercise the power that is theirs and to become true professionals. With this basic assumption as a background, much of what I do in my reading class is designed to help students carefully examine their conceptions about reading instruction.

Individuals rarely change their ideas as a consequence of what they read or hear. It takes much effort on the part of an individual to unlearn a conception. Just giving students an explanation of how or why something is true or effective is not enough. The student must actively create meaning from that explanation. One needs to determine the views that students bring with them to a reading class. Critical conceptions regarding basal readers, standardized tests, and graded schools must be restructured.

To foster the restructuring of conceptions that many preservice teachers hold, I adopt a procedure suggested by McNeil (1988). He suggests that classroom practices that facilitate the restructuring of an individual's ideas generally call for (a) creating a situation that requires the student to invoke their conceptions; (b) encouraging students to state the conceptions clearly, thereby becoming aware of the elements in each conception; (c) encouraging confrontation, bringing out in discussion the difference between students' views and those of others or in many cases conflicting views of their own; (d) creating a conflict between exposed conceptions and some situations that the conception cannot explain; and (e) supporting students' search for resolution and accommodation.

Clearly there is contradiction at the heart of commercial reading materials and their value in helping children learn to read. Helping preservice teachers to restructure their conceptions through the above procedures can help them to unshackle themselves from the devoted use of and reliance on basal readers and standardized tests. Once this happens they can reflect on what works for them and to find their own way toward more valid instructional practices.

### Concerning Skills and Knowledge

Once preservice teachers free themselves from conceptions concerning commercial reading materials, they can assume a more professional role—a role demanding that teachers make important decisions about how reading is to be taught in their classrooms. It is important for teachers to realize that *they* can determine that children learn to read and that *they* must select what *they* feel will be the most effective way to teach children. It is at this point that teachers, as Otto suggests,

must come to tolerate ambiguity. In other words, rather than expecting someone to tell them the best way to teach reading, they must adopt a problem-solving attitude toward teaching children to read.

Assuming that this process of encouraging preservice teachers to adopt a problem-solving attitude is more important than any reading methods discussed, the avoidance of prescription is a major force in helping to develop this attitude. Teacher educators need, it seems to me, to provide teachers with information and *allow them* (not require, prescribe, or legislate) the opportunity to formulate the available choices for themselves, to debate them, and then to choose for themselves. To do this teachers need opportunities to find out what works best. While much time is devoted to information that is available on new theories and knowledge or new directions reading instruction should take, the real issue facing teacher educators is getting teachers to give these ideas a chance to surface in their classrooms.

At Utah State University we are fortunate to have an outstanding university laboratory school. During the time that preservice elementary teachers are enrolled in a second reading class, they also participate in a half-day practicum experience in the Edith Bowen Laboratory School each day. This provides an important opportunity for them to work in classrooms with expert teachers who work in a pragmatic way with children and who will allow preservice teachers to discover for themselves what is "best" and "most effective" in reading instruction. These master teachers are proficient enough to model for preservice teachers and to observe carefully, because it is a blend of demonstration, observation, and guided practice that is most likely to bring about change in teaching, a change to a problem solving approach in meeting children's reading needs.

## Summary

I began this discussion by identifying two types of problems that I see as challenges to helping teachers exercise the power that is theirs—those that relate to values and beliefs and those that relate to skills and knowledge. I have attempted to describe in very general terms how each type might be approached separately. However, in most cases these problems are related and occur together. For example, inexperienced teachers who have difficulty applying sound principles of comprehension instruction during reading instruction may require extensive technical assistance in the classroom to deal with this skill deficiency. However, intensive classroom supervision and direction violate the informal assumption that teachers must learn to rely more on their own instincts and good judgment than on the

dogma of some expert and teachers' norms of professionalism. While this presents an impressive challenge (Roadblocks and Detours if you will) to those of us who work with preservice teachers, it is a challenge that must be met if we are going to help teachers to assume their professional role.

## References

- Austin, M., & Morrison, C. (1963). *The First R*. New York: Wiley.
- Barton, A., & Wilder, D. (1964). Research and practice in the teaching of reading. In M. Miles (Ed.), *Innovations in Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, pp. 361-398.
- Chall, J. (1967). *Learning to read: The great debate*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- McNeil, J. (1988). *Reading comprehension: New directions for classroom practices*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company.
- Otto, W. (1989). Three apocalyptic horseman in *American reading forum yearbook, Vol IX*. (Eds.), Hayes, B. L. & Camperell, K. Logan, UT.
- Smith, F., Cited in: Farr, R. (1982). "The challenge of teaching reading". *Today's Education*. February-March.