GENERAL STATEMENT

I believe that to have a truly fulfilling life the ability to read is imperative. Just in the norm of a day, reading is essential. For nonreaders it must be tremendously frustrating to see characters (the alphabet) on road signs, billboards, menus, vehicle interiors, cereal boxes, etc. and unable to decipher the mysterious coding. Being able to read to me is not only a necessity, but also one of life’s greatest blessings.

EARLY MEMORIES

In elementary school we read the traditional Dick, Jane, and Sally books. I remember different reading circles and having to divide countless words into syllables and write the pronunciations. I’m still not quite sure what a “schwa” sound is supposed to be. This seemed to be a waste of time to me, but it was most likely the foundation for many of our reading skills.

In a way, I thought of reading like something on those baby developmental chart scales the pediatricians use. Around a year, babies learn to walk; around two years, they begin talking; and sometime around six years, children learned to read. I truly don’t remember giving it much thought until I became an educator.

For an earlier autobiography, I asked my mother if she had read to me as a child. She looked at me incredulously and replied, “I can’t believe you asked me that question! I read to you constantly! Your favorites were the little 2 for $1.00 fairy tale and
animal story books made by the Golden Treasury Books.” She told me that they were not the greatest literary works, but that I had memorized most of the stories by the time I was four years old. I find it strange that the brain forgets something as significant as learning to read. My eleven year old daughter, who was read to faithfully, says she remembers us reading together, but mainly The Three Little Pigs, and Piggie Pie. How unbelievable, I thought, considering we read books like Harry Potter and James and the Giant Peach—stories which evidently left little impression.

I was in the 10th grade when I first realized that some people honestly could not read. I remember all of the sophomores being put in a large room and being tested—written and oral readings were required in front of the entire group. It was then that I discovered that some 15-17 year olds couldn’t decode letters. The teachers probably didn’t stop to think about how embarrassing this might be for the nonreaders. A few days after our class testings, we were assigned various literature classes, and I really didn’t dwell much on the nonreaders.

One boy, an African American who was an obvious sports enthusiast was among the nonreaders. Later watching him being cheered at football games, I wondered how he could read playbooks. Our senior year, I actually resented the fact that he was being honored and had received a scholarship at one of the state universities to play football. I’m quite certain he still couldn’t read.
READING INSTRUCTION

My undergraduate college years were spent in education courses, but we received little instruction on teaching children how to read. We were given various basal readers to examine and report on the pros and cons of each. My first year of teaching, I was given a phonovisual chart, guidebook and instructed to teach reading to kids. I used the chart to help children sound out words. I am certain I was not doing it correctly.

When I worked with struggling children, I basically tried to teach them to sound out words and to remember some by sight. There was never any true pattern to what I was doing. I remember trying to get my own children off to a head start in the reading process. I made sight word lists of rhyming words and practiced with them repeatedly. My son had no problem and learned to recite the words with minimal practice. My daughter, on the other hand, seemed to struggle. For the biggest part I thought the struggle was due to a stubbornness that she possesses. She would drive me to frustration, but would in due time, learn the words. I actually thought she enjoyed seeing her mother worry.

Since I was a teacher of middle school kids, I felt like the decoding of words should’ve been mastered before the students made it to my class. I feel that I did an adequate job teaching students the elements of fiction and how to predict and summarize in order to understand a story. I trained with the Sylvan people and become quite adept at teaching students how to “take a test.”
Regrettably, I still do this each April...my students score well on our beloved EOG’s. However, I’m not sure if many of my students actually become stronger readers or just better multiple choice test takers.

I’m almost embarrassed to say, but at one point in my teaching career, I felt that nonreaders were not truly focusing and putting forth the effort to learn to read. I truly never knew how to teach a non- or low ability student how to read until I took Dr. Morris’s class on testing and diagnosing reading students last spring. This was the first time I understood the importance of learning vowel sounds and how learning spelling patterns is so essential to struggling readers. I had done bits and pieces of phonics and sight words with students, but never with any clear rhyme or reason. I did find that part of my idea (most children do learn to read within a certain range on a developmental chart) did have some validity. I found that with fairly adequate instruction, about 75% of first graders pretty much just “take off” and read about half way through the school year. Of course, they need continued guidance, but in general their decoding skills blend with natural ability and they progress.

It’s the other 25% who don’t quite make the range on the charts. This did do much to enlighten me as to why I have seventh graders who are below grade level. If students don’t grasp the foundations in the early years, they really do need additional small group or individual instruction. Regrettably, this instruction is often
In most classrooms, teachers instruct towards the middle and the kids who don’t quite grasp the basics are hurdled on. As the words get more difficult, many begin to rely on sight vocabulary and don’t have the skills needed to decode words on their own. If these students don’t get their consonant and vowels sounds mastered, they continually stay behind most of their peers. Catching up is almost impossibility without intervention. No doubt this is why the initial excitement kids have about school begins to turn to drudgery.

In the last two years I have come to realize the wrongs we are doing to our struggling readers at school. It’s easy to place blame on the state’s testing program; I do feel this has had an impact; though I’m not sure we genuinely were addressing the needs of struggling readers before the testing program became such an integral part of our schools. Our government leaders expect a year’s growth for a year of school. This is not really unreasonable until we consider that a student who begins the year below his grade level is tested at the same level as students on grade level.

HOW I TEACH READING NOW

I do a mixture of teaching in my classroom. While trying to get the basic elements of fiction (plot, character, setting, conflict, flashback, narrator, etc.) and various types of figurative language (metaphors, alliteration, dialect, hyperbole, etc.) across to students, I often do whole group guided readings or have the students work
with partners to read a selection. I am very careful to choose prose
and poetry that have a high interest to most middle schoolers. After
I feel they understand these objectives, I move the students into
books that are at their reading level. I have just recently truly
understood the concept of rate and how it affects a child’s desire to
read. This is where I strive to achieve a year’s growth with the
students. Last year I witnessed kids who proclaimed their hatred of
reading begin to enjoy reading a book. Once they read fluently in a
book that might even be a bit below their reading ability, they
seemed much more confident and didn’t start reading with such
dread. The days they didn’t have the opportunity to read “their”
books, they voiced their disappointment. As the year progressed,
most moved into more difficult books. I did not witness major
miracles, but I did see kids begin to feel better about themselves as
readers.

After plodding through the reading research chapter in the
Handbook of Reading, I can identify with the frustrations many of my
children feel reading. I’m not so certain that continued research is
necessary other than to reemphasize what has already been
concluded. Could it be that we just need to engrain those basic
consonant and vowel sounds into our students using much repetition
and practice rather than trying to find some other miracle solution?
Short of some miracle “How to Read” drug, it seems to me we
already know what we should do, it’s just a matter of providing the
funding to be able to give small group instruction to these children and money to train teachers.

I do know that with each class I take, I learn more about teaching children how to read. I also know that my frustrations continually mount when I think of the constraints we regular classroom teachers have to make changes in the school system’s reading curriculum.