

# Helen Lowe's Speech to the Second Annual Reading Reform Foundation Conference

August 7, 1963

Dr. Lawlor: Next, Mrs. Allen A. Lowe, of The William Street Workshop, Glens Falls – and a Reading Expert, who wrote a chapter in *Tomorrow's Illiterates*.

Mrs. Lowe: Most of you have never heard of *The William Street Workshop*, and explaining that *Workshop* is concerned with preventing and retrieving educational casualties, and re-directing bright students who have not responded to classroom instruction or have been retarded by it, does not give a very clear or useful idea of what goes on there, how the following evidence was secured, or why it should have any special significance.

The *Workshop* is really a small unpretentious laboratory where the individual students themselves are the material under study. They observe, analyze, and come to identify and understand the basis of their individual disabilities. They help to devise, develop and practice, under careful guidance, study and learning exercises which meet their particular needs, over a wide range of subjects, grades, ages and abilities. They are made aware that the purpose of the work they are doing is not to meet any artificial standard but to enable them to discover and direct their own abilities and go assume responsibility for their own progress. These activities are all based on the conviction that as a preliminary to unimpeded learning they must be established in the learning mind as the first and indispensable requirement a realistic and logical concept of English as an alphabetic language.

To this end, regardless of the area of academic difficulty, we read endlessly, and every derivation from the text is noted in individual records or on tape. Sometimes unexpected and startling **patterns** emerge from this objectively recorded material. It is about a striking phenomenon which has appeared conspicuously and with increasing frequency during the past two years that I am going to tell you about today, because it has significant bearing upon the importance of presenting the **letters** of the alphabet, their **sounds** and their **function** as the essential first, and I repeat **first** step in teaching children to read. The record shows a marked difference between the progress and the problems of children who have had the phonics approach superimposed upon a Look-and-See basis, with its stereotyped stockpile-of-sight-words, and those whose first reading experience has been the discover that the letters in the words are the cues to its meaning.

Back in 1951 I analyzed and classified 10,000 recorded reading errors, and published the result in a pamphlet entitled "How they Read." This was definitely a study in dislocation and distortion induced by Look-and-Say, for at that time it is doubtful that a single one of my students had been taught that the letters of the alphabet had any relation to the sounds of the spoken words. Many of them did not even know the names of all the letters. For ten years my students continued to make their thousands of reading errors, which fell exactly into the categories I had established and described, without any significant variations. The students responded quickly and eagerly to my introduction to them of the alphabetic approach to reading, and their immediate and invariable progress was impressive. About 1959 I first observed a curious difference in their responses, particularly among younger students. At first it took the

form of something almost impossible to record – a curious reluctance, sometimes approaching stubborn refusal, to pronounce a word, after it had been correctly sounded. The words would be whispered or muttered indistinctly in a distressed fashion for an utterly disproportionate amount of time, and the eventual pronunciation was garbled or completely unrelated to the printed word. So much time was consumed that the flow the sentence and the meaning was lost.

This curious phenomenon persisted and was clearly becoming more frequent. I was aware that it was changing, too, but the only firm conclusion I could reach – and this wasn't very firm – was that it did not occur at high school level, or very often beyond the fifth or sixth grades. The record showed this, but I was unable to account for it, satisfactorily. The phenomenon continued but it was changing; there was evidentially a factor that I did not identify.

About two years ago it began to jell. By then most of my students had some systematic if generally confused and incomplete teaching of “sounds” imposed upon and still accompanied by their Look-and-Say, and presently it became very clear what they were doing. They were “sounding out” words, letter by letter, with appalling inaccuracy, and then disregarding the idiot noises they had made, struggling to “recognize” the word in standard Look-and-Say fashion, by configuration, association, surmise or sheer uncomprehending memory, hindered even by the bastard sounds they had reluctantly and uselessly produced.

It was, of course, immediately clear why this mongrelization had appeared first at the elementary level, and why the students in junior high and high school levels continued to grasp the alphabetic approach to reading. They had not been exposed to two completely incompatible and mutually contradictory concepts of reading as their first introduction to reading, and by the time they came to the *Workshop* they knew they could not read and were desperately aware of the importance of learning. They were able to do what elementary children cannot, indeed, should not be expected to do – repudiate by choice the unserviceable and frustrating method in favor of their intelligence and experience could see relieved them of their handicap.

For your consideration I will list only a few of these futile products of “some phonics” and the muddle-minded “combination method.” Note that the following misreadings, less spectacular than some of the fantastic production numbers of the discredited Look-and-Say, are even more insidious in their consequences, since they discredit by association the alphabetic initial approach, which was never made.

A few typical examples from my files follow. It must be repeated and emphasized that the pronunciation in the right-hand column were produced after the word had been “sounded” correctly.

miles	rĕad	pebbles, pieces
suddenly		steadily, secretly
icicles		inches
bawled		understood
nightingales		neighbor
success		sponges
laundry		lunch
gently		carefully
empty		mantel
twisted		instantly
gardenia		granny

Do you recall Dr. Rafferty's answer to his own question for parents to ask: "Do you teach a basic stock of sight-words before you teach letters and sounds?" The answer is, "If your teacher answers 'yes,' this accounts for the 30% or more of children who are not learning to read, for universally poor spelling (with good spellers the exception rather than the rule), and for the postponement of independence in reading which is characteristic of even our so-called 'good' readers."

## Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter.

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This speech is taken from *The Second Annual Reading Reform Foundation Conference*, August 7, 1963 at the Hotel Astoria, College Hall, New York, N.Y. I received this document in a box of reference material from one of America's leading reading expert, Dr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld.

I had previously published three essays by Helen Lowe on my website. This document is very special because it goes **behind the scenes** and explains in detail how she went about her research and the discoveries she made. Her work is of permanent value and should be given serious consideration when trying to understand the enormous number of illiterates our schools are producing.

For anyone who thinks her examples are incredible, I have seen exactly the same kinds of errors with the kids coming out of our local guided-reading classrooms.

She worked along with Charles Walcutt and Watson Washburn to urge the New York Board of Regents and the State education department to teach alphabet-phonics.

This speech is a clear updating of her previously published works in the light of further experience. It is especially important in the light of what I consider our modern "combination methods." I quite frankly do not know of any commercially available **basal** phonics program that is truly phonics-first. I hope and pray that this situation will change; but in the meantime, I can recommend the free phonics-first programs available on my website, [www.donpotter.net](http://www.donpotter.net)

I would especially like to thank Helen Lowe's granddaughter, Dora Smith, for permission to publish her grandmother's materials.

Donald L. Potter of Odessa, Texas published this article on February 21, 2010.