

Joseph, a Beginning Reader

At the time of testing in 1994, Joseph, an African American living in Boston, was fifty-nine years old. He had grown up on the outskirts of a small town in South Carolina, where his family were sharecroppers raising cotton and tobacco. He reported that his father could read “a little” but that his mother was completely illiterate. His test scores as an adult indicated that he could recognize words at an early first-grade level and had not mastered the most basic levels of word analysis skills. Joseph was unable to read the 3 Grade Equivalent (GE) reading comprehension passage, the lowest GE available in the battery used. His oral vocabulary at 5 GE was actually slightly higher than that of many adult nonreaders from working-class backgrounds. Following is his reading profile:

Rosner	1 GE ⁶
Word analysis	1 GE
Word recognition	1 GE
Spelling	1.5 GE
Oral reading	1 GE
Comprehension	Not attempted
Oral vocabulary	5 GE

Joseph is a living compendium of the risk factors, both social and personal, identified in *PRD*. He attended a segregated, rural school that was a two-mile walk from his home and where, based on his reports, he received poor-quality reading instruction. Classes were large, and what few books there were could not be taken home. His only memories of reading instruction were of the teacher’s writing words on the blackboard and the children being asked to spell them letter by letter, and then being asked to read them.⁷ After his father died, when Joseph was eight years old, he had to work in the fields for most of the year to contribute to the family income, and he attended school only sporadically from that point on, eventually dropping out permanently at age sixteen. Poor-quality schools coupled with poor attendance was a common experience among low-literacy adults of Joseph’s generation, especially if they grew up in rural areas.

Based on current phonemic awareness testing and subsequent attempts to teach the alphabetic principle to Joseph using a variety of methods, we feel it is likely that Joseph has a phonologically based reading disability. A subsequent evaluation at the Massachusetts General Hospital Speech and Communications Disorders Program confirmed these observations. This basic phonological processing difficulty was discussed at length in *PRD* as the most prevalent personal risk factor for early reading problems.

We cannot tell with certainty how severe Joseph’s phonological disability was when he was a child. Results of intervention studies cited in *PRD* suggest that if children with moderate disabilities in this area receive early instruction in phonological awareness, their rates of reading failure can be greatly reduced. (See summaries of this research by Blachman, 1994, 1997.) These kinds of early interventions did not exist when Joseph started school in the late 1930s. We can only speculate on what might have been the results if he had been given such help. Phonological development in children not only contributes to reading success; reading and spelling themselves

probably contribute reciprocally to phonological development (Blachman, 1997). In Joseph's case, fifty years of not reading or spelling may have caused whatever limited phoneme awareness skills he possessed as a child to deteriorate. As is often the case with ABE students, Joseph's personal risk factors for reading difficulties, such as his inherited phonological difficulties, were undoubtedly exacerbated by social risk factors: his lack of exposure to reading and books as a young child and the particularly inadequate reading instruction he reported receiving in school.

Despite this formidable array of risk factors, Joseph has enjoyed considerable success in life. He worked in a number of factories from the 1950s to 1980s, rising to low-level supervisory positions in some of them through his hard work and excellent interpersonal skills. Joseph married a woman who was a high school graduate, and once their children were grown he worked overtime so that she could attend college and eventually earn a master's degree in business administration. They own a triple-decker home in Boston and have raised three children, and his wife now uses her computer and accounting skills to manage their small trucking company, which also employs their sons. She and the sons draw special maps for Joseph to follow when he has to make a delivery to an unfamiliar location, and she helps him study for truck driving licensing tests. Joseph is the treasurer of his church, but he would like to be able to read from the Bible at services and teach Sunday school.

In many ways Joseph resembles the low-literacy adults described by Fingeret (1983) who are able to rely on family members and networks of friends to help them successfully negotiate the world of print. Still, Joseph's accomplishments are remarkable even in the context of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, when workers with minimal reading skills could find steady employment at good wages in factories. In today's job market Joseph's success would be much harder to replicate without basic literacy skills.

Notes

6. The Rosner is a test of phonological awareness including items that require phoneme deletion.

References

- Blachman, B. A. (1994). What we have learned from longitudinal studies of phonological processing and reading, and some unanswered questions: A response to Torgesen, Wagner, and Rashotte. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 27, 287–291.
- Blachman, B. A. (1997). Early intervention and phonological awareness: A cautionary tale. In B. A. Blachman (Ed.), *Foundations of reading acquisition and dyslexia*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Fingeret, H. A. (1983). Social networks: A new perspective on independence and illiterate adults. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 33, 133–146.

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