

The R&D Undergirding BRI-ARI

The history of BRI-ARI and the R&D that led to its current status extends back four decades and is divided into four periods. What transpired in each of these periods is sketched below.

1966–1974

SWRL was one of several Regional Educational Labs established by the US Federal Government in 1966. SWRL set as its mission: “R&D to provide research based, quality verified resources for use by schools in reliably accomplishing significant instructional outcomes.” The SWRL Reading Program was the flagship resource. The sustained inquiry was conducted by a Lab staff which grew to more than 250. It was housed in a 96,000 square feet facility designed and equipped specifically to support educational R&D by the renowned architectural firm, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. It also involved the cooperative collaboration of a very large number of pupils, school personnel and parents in providing the feedback basic to the development endeavor.

The details of the development are documented in Development of Initial BRI-ARI (www.piperbooks.co.uk/technical_papers.htm). In addition to the Reading Program, a lasting contribution of the R&D was the first full compilation of the English Alphabetic Code by SWRL linguists. The Code was later independently recompiled by Diane McGuinness and is currently accessible in more convenient formats:

www.ourrighttoread.com

www.phonicsinternational.com/guidance_book.pdf

The R&D culminated in a quality verification involving more than 100,000 students in more than 400 participating LEAs in 1972–73 that was replicated in 1973–74. The details of this inquiry are documented in Making Change Happen (www.piperbooks.co.uk/technical_papers.htm).

The results of the inquiry:

The data consistently support the explanation that the difference in performance among the various categories resulted in differences in the number of days spent on the instruction during the year rather than from any differential effectiveness applied to pupils with different biosocial characteristics.

The data indicate that the concept of “educationally disadvantaged” is a creation of manipulated and manipulable conditions readily under the control of schools rather than from immutable genetic and environmental factors that inherently impede schooling.

The findings of the study were widely ignored.

1975–1979

SWRL considered the “reading problem solved.” The program was published by Ginn & Co. and the Lab went on to other R&D. But the Lab learned the hard way that the politics and economics of government, publishing and “schools” have to be considered in addition to a technical solution. By 1979, Ginn had taken the program off the market and the US government had abandoned large scale educational R&D.

1980–2000

“Whole Language” swept the English-speaking world. SWRL was closed in 1986 and all SWRL-developed products and most of the research documentation was destroyed. By this time, however, the children instructed with the SWRL Reading Program had gone on to become high-school seniors. A former SWRL senior manager and an associate conducted a large-scale comparative controlled follow-up study that is documented in *The Long-term Effects on High School Seniors of Learning to Read in Kindergarten* (www.piperbooks.co.uk/technical_papers.htm).

The results of the study:

Students who received BRI instruction had (a) superior current reading skills, (b) higher grades and better attendance in school. They needed and received less remedial instruction in both elementary school, had better attendance records, ended up being in higher academic tracks, and spent more out-of-school time reading books.

There was absolutely no evidence of any negative effects from the early-age reading instruction.

Across all ethnic background, gender, and social class variables, fewer BRI-instructed students were reading at-or-below the 5th grade level. Put another way, there were about one-third fewer “functionally illiterate” high school seniors among those who received BRI instruction compared to those who did not. Moreover, the BRI-instructed students came from families with a lower social class background than their peers, and their parents had less formal education. This is consistent with the fact that school districts chose to use BRI in their economically poorest schools.

The more BRI instruction the Kindergarteners received, the greater the positive differences.

These results were again universally ignored.

2001–

Dick Schutz, the Executive Director of SWRL, had kept in touch with Fred Niedermeyer who had managed SWRL’s instructional R&D and Ralph Hanson who had managed the Technical Development. They came to the realization that Information Technology had advanced to the point that virtually everything that had formerly required a Lab of 250 specialists could now be done from a single desktop work station.

During the same interim the quality of reading instruction in the English-speaking world had if anything declined. The SWRL Reading Program was still “ahead of its time.” The advances in IT made it possible to strip away the elaborate and costly training and support components. The instructional protocol could be simplified to “Say the sounds and read the word”. None of the reading research conducted in the interim required any modification of the original substance and structure of the instruction.

With this realization, the three formed the corporation, 3RsPlus, Inc. A single copy of the original program had remained in existence. From this, the materials were digitized to improve their appearance.

The original program was constructed to detailed technical specifications prepared by SWRL linguists and psychologists, but this documentation was destroyed. So it was necessary to “reverse engineer” the linguistic structure. This involved a good deal of tedious analytic work. But it yielded the foundation for SPELL and for the Reading Mastery Tests.

The original program was used successfully with Special Education children. But “Special Education” was an incidental matter at the time. In the interim “Special Needs” became a very large matter, with many children relegated to “Specific Learning Disability.” It happened that independently of 3RsPlus, an early BRI user, Kathy Nell, formed a yahoo group as a forum for anyone interested. The participants happened to be largely tutors and parents of special needs children. Their experiences have constituted N=1 experimental replications of effects. Their reports have proved invaluable in refining understanding of how to best use the product/protocol. This contribution of Kathy and all forum members is gratefully acknowledged.

The UK version of BRI-ARI is a modest improvement over the current US version, effected through the joint venture of 3RsPlus and Piper Books. The instruction has continued to be upgraded. Future upgrades can be anticipated as the state of the art advances.