

A Ground-Breaking Collaboration in the Great Depression: Elizabeth C. Morriss of North Carolina (1877-1960) & Edna Phillips of Massachusetts (1890-1968) and Their Experimental Reading Study on Adult Beginners (1935)

The circumstances of the first meeting of an adult educator, Elizabeth C. Morriss, a widow from North Carolina in her mid-fifties, with a librarian, Edna Phillips, a single woman from Massachusetts in her mid-forties, were most promising. Both were active in their respective fields, Morriss in the field of adult elementary education, and Phillips in the field of library adult education. Despite their years of experience, they were both pursuing degrees in Adult Education from Teachers College, Columbia University in New York City, perhaps to get credentials that would certify them as recognized leaders in their field.

They met in a Problems in Adult Education seminar, where they decided to collaborate in a study to assess needs and evaluate materials for adult beginners in reading, writing, and speaking English. It is likely that Phillips saw in Morriss the experienced mentor she needed at this point of her career and, conversely, that Morriss saw in Phillips an enthusiastic protégé and research partner. The two became a team and determined to undertake together an experimental reading study on the reading of adult beginners for which they received a grant from the American Association for Adult Education, the funding arm of the Carnegie Corporation.¹

The Investigators: Morriss & Phillips

Before their fortuitous first meeting, Elizabeth C. Morriss had gained a local reputation supervising and directing the Community Schools for Adult Beginners of Asheville, Buncombe County, North Carolina, and a national reputation from working on several committees addressing illiteracy and its eradication.² Edna Phillips, the Supervisor of Work with Racial Groups of the Massachusetts Free Public Library Commission, had gained a reputation for working with immigrants to learn to speak, read, and write English and to prepare them for the naturalization process leading to full U.S. citizenship.³

Both Morriss and Phillips had been concerned with the lives of adult beginners, both foreign- and native-born of all ethnicities. They soon discovered that evening elementary school administrators and teachers in New York City faced similar problems with the individuals in their classes. A conference of Morriss and Phillips with two New York City evening school administrators resulted in a decision to include the evening school students of the same types as those encountered in Massachusetts and in North Carolina, specifically, foreign-born and native-born, both white and African American, all on educational levels ranging from fourth to eighth grade.⁴

The Service Study

The study was in the combined Library Adult Education/Adult Elementary Education field. The study used the terms librarian and adult educator interchangeably. The first decision of the investigators was whether to use regular research methods or the “service study,” another term for case study. The service study was chosen because of the large scope of the problem, the small amount of time available for the study, and the simplicity of the procedures to implement the study. The service study was designed to recognize a problem, define it in specific terms, and collect data needed to investigate the problem. The service study would allow the researchers to make assumptions regarding the implications of the problem. Ample time was needed to consult relevant sources, plan and implement the investigation, interpret the findings, and draw conclusions. The investigators realized the limitation of the service study, that, even though the data were valid, the results of the study might not be reliable in other settings.⁵

The service study was set up in two evening elementary schools in New York City: Public School No. 157, served by the George Bruce Branch Library; and Public School No. 89, served by the 135th Street Branch. The forty-four men and women in Public School No. 157 participating in the

study included eight nationalities. The sixty in Public School No. 89 were all African American men. The total number of participants from the two evening schools was 104.

Three additional experimental centers were established in other cities: the Morton Street School in Newark, New Jersey, served by the Newark Public Library, supplied eighty-three men and women chosen from a mixed group of African Americans and five European nationalities. In the State Street School of Springfield, Massachusetts, served by the Springfield Public Library, the forty-nine men and women chosen for the study were predominantly foreign-born, representing six nationalities. The U.S. Industrial Reformatory in Chillicothe, Ohio, served by its own institutional library, provided seventy-four native-born men, African American and white. These three cooperating sites provided 206 volunteer participants, men and women, native-born, and foreign-born.⁶

Reading Placement Tests for Participants

Preliminary procedures for the experimental study included (1) compiling, with the aid of advisory experts, an experimental list of books of probable interest to adult elementary students; (2) developing an Interest-Finder to determine the reading interests of the study participants; (3) preparing reading tests on three levels of difficulty: easy, less easy, difficult (classified respectively as A, B, and C); and (4) securing the actual books for the participants to read.

After the reading tests had been administered and the Interest-Finder had supplied the criteria for the selection of books, the actual reading of the books began. Book reviews were discussed individually with the participants and also the ranking of the topics

on the Interest-Finder in order to discover whether actual preferences had been recorded accurately.⁷

All of these activities became more extensive than originally envisioned and planned. The original investigators were given permission and funds to add a third investigator, Marion V. Morse, formerly Union Superintendent of Schools, Berkshire County, Massachusetts, and then Supervisor of City Schools, in East Chicago, Indiana, along with eight clerical assistants. As methods were developed in the New York City experiment centers, they were forwarded to the three cooperating centers in Newark, Springfield, and Chillicothe. All data from the three cooperating centers were sent to the New York City central laboratory for recording, analyzing, and interpreting in relation to the data from the two New York City centers. Each of the cooperating centers recorded and maintained its own data for use in the local situations.⁸

Advisory Committee for the Study

An important element in the initial planning of the study was the realization that the solution for the independent reading problems of men and women of limited education could only be solved through the cooperation of many agencies concerned with the welfare of the participants. Leaders in many organizations were asked to serve as members of the Advisory Committee. These included, but were not limited to, the American Association for Adult Education, the American Library Association, the National Association of Book Publishers, the Adult Education Department of the National Education Association, the National Council of the National Board of Motion Pictures, the Council of Adult Education for the Foreign-Born, the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau

of Prisons, the U.S. Office of Education, and the University of Chicago.⁹ Guidance for the study was also gained from preliminary reading and study of research articles of William S. Gray and Ruth Learned Munroe as well as those by Douglas Waples and Ralph W. Tyler.¹⁰

Interest-Finder & Student-Purpose List

The Student-Purpose List, based on the Interest-Finder responses on specific interests and purposes of the student participants, included Self-Improvement (95 titles), acquaintance-ship with experiences of broad human interest (52 titles), and recreation (12 titles). The Student-Purpose List also included references to articles and books by professionals in the reading and adult elementary education fields (45 titles, including two sources by Morriss and one source by Phillips).¹¹

Very few books or articles could be located with content suited to serve the purposes indicated by the individuals participating the experiment. There were two types of literature which seemed best adapted to meet the purposes of the participants: (1) simplifications of books (particularly fiction or biography) with content of universal appeal, (2) and direct expositions of scientific, practical, and semi-technical information in magazine articles and newspapers that were applicable and appealing to the participants.¹²

Findings

The most significant conditioning factors in the ability of students to appreciate the reading material offered them resulted from an understanding of their cultural background and social status. Three distinct types of background received careful attention: that of the African Americans, who had grown up in the United States, but

were still socially and economically depressed; that of the native-born white Americans, particularly with regard to the U.S. Industrial Reformatory participants, whose experience

joint field of literacy and elementary education for adult beginners. Morriss and Phillips's study based on a two-year collaboration at Teachers College, Columbia University has not received the

remained a lifetime member of the National Education Association. She died July 16, 1960, in Selma, Alabama, where she was born.¹⁵

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had been gained mainly in agriculture and mining; and that of new Americans, or immigrants, whose experience had been gained in other countries, and who were for the time being trapped in an awkward position with regard to understanding U.S. social, civic, and economic laws and customs.¹³

Implications of the Study for Publishers & Authors of Texts for Adults

The significance of the findings for publishers, authors, and printers was that there existed an immense book market practically untouched. For thousands of adult beginner readers there were available only a handful of satisfying books—a fact only too well-known to adult educators. The problem of furnishing these men and women with satisfying reading materials had been a baffling and seemingly insurmountable problem. Practically none of the many elements involved in the study had been determined experimentally. Almost nothing had been scientifically established in regard to this problem.¹⁴ Morriss and Phillips's study opened the way for many new materials and avenues of teaching adult beginners in reading.

Rarely do researchers unknown to each other come together to produce such a ground-breaking study in the

attention it deserves. Their study laid the groundwork for other studies of the literacy and elementary education needs of adult beginners, both foreign- and native-born. The study proved that there was a need for more appealing books, articles, newspapers, and newsletters for adult beginners in reading and writing, as well as basic information on U.S. customs, laws, etc. for the foreign-born population in preparation for the citizenship application process.

Morriss's Later Years

After finishing her education at Columbia University, Morriss returned to Raleigh in 1936. She served from 1936 to 1940 as director of the Adult Education Division of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the Works Progress Administration. On August 21, 1940, she resigned as director of the North Carolina WPA Education Program, but continued as director of the North Carolina Adult Education Division of the Department of Public Instruction.

In July 1941, Morriss retired after a career of twenty-two years as teacher and administrator in North Carolina. She was the very first state employee to retire under the provisions of the new State Employees and Teacher Retirement Act enacted by the 1941 North Carolina General Assembly. She

Phillips's Later Years

After returning to Massachusetts from New York, Phillips served as librarian of the Sawyer Free Library in Gloucester, Massachusetts, from 1934 to 1939. From October 1945 through October 1948, the American Library Association Committee on Work with the Foreign Born (1918-1948) under the leadership of Phillips accelerated the process of transition from an organization promoting programs for the Americanization of immigrants into an organization working for the improvement of international and intercultural relations and reading for all Americans, native-born whites and African Americans and New Americans. From 1939 until her forced retirement in 1962 at the age of seventy-two, Phillips served as librarian of the Morrill Library in Norwood, Massachusetts. She died at the age of 78 in 1968.¹⁶

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