PERSPECTIVES OF LANGUAGE DISABILITY:  

II. The Present—Where Do We Stand?  

ROGER E. SAUNDERS**  

Any of you who are over twenty-one know that I have the easiest part on this panel, because I am to talk about the present; and, being twenty-one, you would know that the present is the most fleeting experience you can have. Before you know it, what was to have been tomorrow is already yesterday. Another reason why it is easy for me is that those of you who read your daily newspaper already know what is happening at the present time. Perhaps there can be some organization to the presentation of what is taking place, and I shall attempt to produce a semblance of it here. I've kept my ears quite open during the earlier parts of this conference and have already learned lots of new things about what is going on in some other sections of the country. Some of these are items which have not yet reached the papers; they are news still in the talking stage. Mostly, though, this is a round-up of information some of which is known to each of you—an attempt to bring us together in common knowledge.

Generally, I have a feeling of optimism at this Twenty-first Annual Conference of the Orton Society. I might not have felt this way ten or fifteen years ago, but now the primary concern of this conference—the recognition, study, and treatment of children with Specific Language Disability—Dyslexia—has surely gotten past the just talking stage and found identity. Let me read you the preface to the report of a long year’s study prepared by the National Advisory Committee on Dyslexia and Related Reading Problems (HEW). “Eight million children in America’s elementary and secondary schools today will not learn to read adequately. One child in seven is handicapped in his ability to acquire essential reading skills. This phenomenon pervades all segments of our society—black and white, boys and girls, the poor and the affluent.” Recently a reporter to the Baltimore Sun said of this report, “. . . one more study to tell us what kind of problems we have in reading in this country will be like another leaf falling in the jungle . . .” Yes these incidence percentages we, in the Orton Society, have long since pretty much agreed upon, but now it seems that everybody knows that we do have a national problem.

** Clinical psychologist, President of the Orton Society, Associate Professor, Loyola College, Baltimore, Md.
The components of the problem? Here is a collection from a cross-section of the present scene:

1. Of the many recent trends coming to focus on our interests, I don't need to remind you that Jeanne Chall's book, *Learning to Read: the Great Debate*, published three years ago and still raising hackles in the halls of pedagogy, documented something which most of you have known for a long time. It seems that a "decoding emphasis" is the one which her review of research has suggested as having the greatest value for teaching reading to beginners. Beginning about 1910, schools gradually switched into initial teaching with primary emphasis on "meaning". You know, "Teach the child to recognize the whole word because of the meaning behind the word." While no one doubts the importance of meaning as the *goal* of reading, Dr. Chall's study, which was under the sponsorship of the Carnegie Foundation, supported *beginning* with the "decoding" emphasis—teaching at the start, the fact that the letters of the alphabet stand for the sounds of the native language and that the brain has to know the relation of letters to sounds in order to get to the meaning. Once this is learned, then as Margaret Rawson has just pointed out, the process of translation from print to sound to meaning becomes automatic in the activity of the brain. The eye sees the stimulus (the letter-symbol) for the brain, which then organizes it with what has been learned through hearing, and then the child, who already knows his spoken language, can get the meaning. With this emphasis on decoding at least partially accepted, most publishers now have in their catalogues books related to phonics. Some are good and some not so good, but the important point is that phonic emphasis is coming back again.

2. The term "dyslexia" is fighting for survival. It is not being totally ignored nor is it being cast into outer darkness by everyone, and in some circles it is fully accepted, with gradually increasing acceptance of the Greek derivation (difficulty with words) and the World Federation of Neurology definition.

3. In some nests the eggs of learning are being warmed and nurtured by different hens. I call your attention to what is happening in many places, but, if you are educators, don't go out screaming or trembling because you think you are going to lose your jobs tomorrow! If I were in the position in which some of you may be, however, I think I would pay pretty close attention to what is happening in, say, Gary, Indiana, and some other places where a commercial company from the outside is being hired to do the educating job. In *U.S. News and World Report*, October 12, 1970 (just the other day!) Dr. Alfonso Holliday, II, President of the Gary School Board, explaining the contracting of these firms, said,