

Reading Instruction: Plus Ça Change...

Unless we learn from our past extremes, our current emphasis on whole language may lead us to neglect phonics and other necessary principles of language instruction.

This is a time of great change in the teaching of reading . . . again. The French say the more things change, the more they stay the same; their shrug derives from an Old World perspective that extends farther back than ours. The sameness is apparent not so much from one moment to the next as from one cycle of time and events to another—from one life span to another, from one government to another, from one love, one war, one fashion to another, from one reform in education to another.

And so, as things change in reading instruction, passions of the past break through again like jonquils in the spring. And, like jonquils in the spring, many of the old ideas are welcome. But one must wistfully add that they will flower only to die once more. Almost certainly, the new-old ideas will again be oversold, misunderstood, overdone, then overwhelmed by reactions to the excesses. Naively eager, and oblivious of the past, we recreate not only enlightened curriculums but the very conditions that doom them.

Coming Around Again

Principles of reading instruction that are now promoted and welcomed as new have fired the enthusiasms of a former generation of teachers. At one time, the concept of the *language arts* was hailed by those who were frustrated by the unnatural separation of reading and writing instruction and by the virtual absence of concern for listening and speaking skills. The emphasis on the unifying language base of

the language arts was wholesome. The term *language arts* continued in use, but the unified curriculum was lost. Now the current enthusiasm for the integration of reading and writing greets that integration as new. Listening and speaking are still largely ignored; I wonder why.

About the time I entered the field of education, more than 40 years ago, a curricular movement emphasizing the education of the *whole child* was very popular. I think the *whole child* beats *whole language*. Louise Rosenblatt (1990), in her acceptance of the NCRE Research Award for Lifetime Research Achievement in the English Language Arts, chided "whole language" for compartmentalizing language. Perhaps it does. Language is used by the whole child.

And this is not the first time that an enthusiasm for using *literature* in the teaching of reading has influenced the curriculum. And I see in the *teacher-as-researcher* many reincarnated principles of *action research*. Why, if we welcome the wholesome contributions of whole language, the integration of reading and

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writing instruction, the use of literature in reading instruction, did we abandon the similar contributions of the language arts movement and the goal of educating the whole child? Primarily, I believe, because changes in education ("reforms") are typically promoted as replacements rather than improvements. We never seem to try to improve education; we are forever revolutionizing it. It is undoubtedly more stimulating to participate in a revolution than to do one's job better. But, as Slavin (1989) has put it, if there is to be real generational improvement in education, "the emphasis in staff development must shift from what's new to implementation of what works" (p. 757).

Going to Extremes

Revolution—political or educational—may seem necessary when conditions have become insufferably bad. In education, conditions can become insufferably bad when good ideas are carried to extremes. When the present way, whatever it may be, has been carried to ridiculous extremes, it may seem that the only way to return to sanity is to throw out the present way entirely.

A recent and familiar example of the extremes to which most educational fads are carried can be seen in the way we broke down reading into innumerable skills. We all know of classrooms where most of the children are quite capable of doing independent reading but where there is little time for it. The children are fully occupied, instead, with a mandatory and seemingly interminable series of exercises and skills tests.

Just a few years ago, the *open classroom* concept was introduced, widely misinterpreted, and carried to extremes that destroyed both the movement and the values it contained. Many of the schools without walls became schools without substance. Earlier, the curriculum for educating the whole child drifted to extremes that frustrated parents' wishes that their children's education include a core of traditional subjects.

I do not believe that these movements—their wholesome beginnings, their irrational growth, and ultimate self-destruction—have yet been thor-



Photograph by A. Jean Campbello

There is a danger in the literature-based reading movement that good writing in science, mathematics, and other non-English subjects might be overlooked. Children should be exposed to a variety of well-written nonfiction materials.

oughly documented. Scholarly examination of their rise and fall might teach us a great deal about how to retain the positive contributions from whole language and literature-based instruction.

Why is it that concepts in education become fads or movements and get carried to foolish extremes? One reason is a university system that spurs professors to make a name for themselves by promoting something "new." Tenure, advancement, and status depend on having articles published and on getting grant money. The chance of being published is greatly increased if you write about the latest trend. If you were a professor wanting to get published in *The Reading Teacher*, what would you write about? Transfer of learning? No. Thirty years ago you might have written about transfer. Now you would write about whole language or literature-based instruction. Although teachers could profit more from a good article on transfer than from one more article on whole language, what gets published is that article on whole language. And getting grants depends on salesmanship—you

must convince a granting agency that your work will attract attention and make the granting agency look good. Since tenure, advancement, and status depend so much on salesmanship, the professor feels impelled to sell a "new and better" product in order to succeed . . . or at least survive.

Often there is a time lag while the professor indoctrinates a sufficient number of doctoral students to constitute a critical mass of new professors committed to the new method and while the extremes of the current curriculum become sufficiently oppressive to make the field ripe for change. Then the new method, promoted by these new professors, sweeps in and prospers for awhile. But, as each of these professors adds a burden of new details, the new method in its turn becomes the "saber-toothed curriculum," ripe for ridicule and replacement by a *new* new approach.

Publishers often get blamed for developing new methods so they can sell more materials. Actually, publishers are not a major source of new devel-

opments. The publisher who introduces something too new and different in reading is likely to take a big loss, both in money and in market share. But once it seems clear that a new fad is taking hold, then the publishers are right there to add all the bells and whistles they can sell. Publishers also may try to swell profits by extending some new practice up and down the grades. For example, if schools buy primary-grade materials that teach and test a series of decoding skills, publishers will find more difficult skills—of interest only to a language scientist—and build them into lessons and materials for the higher grades. Thus, publishers carry a developing trend to extremes in order to sell more of it. But the schools ask for it. They buy.

Schools do indeed encourage this carrying of educational trends to foolish extremes. Some schools aggressively embrace new fads; others accept faddish developments to defend themselves against crusading critics. Our schools are not well served by those who see no value in any but one idea. As Bartlett Giamatti (1988) told a recent graduating class at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology:

The diagnosticians for whom all illnesses are similar because all cures are identical, the purveyors of an ism, the dealers in system . . . the Simplifiers who tell you . . . they have boiled life down to a bumper sticker—these are the enemies . . . of the life of the mind (p. 18).

Profiting From the Past

Why can't we profit from our past experience? One reason is that it is sometimes difficult to recognize in the new trends the related ideas of the past. Promoters of a new fad in education, like politicians on the stump, may be very vague about the details of their schemes. Like candidates for office citing isolated horrors, they can be scathing and specific about shortcomings of current practice while their own ideas remain glowing generalities. It is much easier and safer to be explicit about the weaknesses in someone else's scheme than to describe the specifics of one's own.

We educators abet the faddists in

this vagueness. Have you noticed that we usually talk about different approaches to the teaching of reading? "A phonics approach," "a psycholinguistic approach," "a skills approach," "a literature-based approach." We need to do more than just *approach* the teaching of reading. Those who seriously wish to improve education must do more than describe a classroom atmosphere; they must describe how that atmosphere can be achieved and maintained and how people function within it. There is a productive middle ground between being stiflingly prescriptive and merely exhortative. It is called good teaching, and those who seek to improve education should practice it.

A second reason we fail to profit from our past is that we choose to ignore it. After learning that some professors of reading were requiring that students' papers contain no references that were more than 10 years old, Herber and Michel (Herber 1990) studied all the references in several recent reading journals. They found that 85 percent of all the references cited in the *Reading Research Quarterly*, the *Journal of Reading*, and the *Reading Teacher* in a recent 5-year period were articles that were no more than 15 years old at the time they were cited. There is an intriguing irony, of course, in the professors' desire that their students know only recent work: they teach their students a style of "scholarship" that insures the professors' own rapid oblivion.

A third reason that we do not use our past as a guide is that it is genuinely hard to know when an idea really does work well. There are so many other

factors—public attitudes, television programming, parental assistance, the interests and backgrounds in a particular community—that can influence the outcome of education, often far more than a particular teaching method.

Since it is, in fact, very hard to know how well we are doing and how educational achievements under our present practices compare to what was achieved, or might be achieved, under different practices, the yearning for security is strong. We need to know that what we are doing for the children is the right thing to do. So, if someone says this is the right way, and everyone else seems to be going along, it is hard to resist following. We don't want to risk being wrong. We are told coercively, "If you're not for us, you're against the kids." These pressures make it difficult for a thoughtful teacher to hang back and maintain a balanced, independent position.

Finally, we embrace each new-old trend without considering our past experience because, old or new, the core of the new trend simply makes sense to us. Behind every fad in education is a reasonable idea. For example, consider the fad of breaking down reading into objectives and skills. It was perfectly reasonable and, indeed, salutary to think about exactly what we were trying to accomplish. It was perfectly reasonable and, indeed, salutary to think about what children needed to be able to do before asking them to do something more advanced. But it was *not* reasonable to ignore goals that could not be stated in objective terms, to impose a fancied sequence where a real one could not be found, to break down tasks into skills so numerous that neither the student nor the teacher could see the ultimate objective, to require students to practice component skills that were difficult only because they had been deprived of their natural context.

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Making Language Meaningful

The current trend toward a curriculum that emphasizes real reading and writing is surely welcome. But as this trend in its turn gets carried to extremes, potential abuses loom ominously. Will whole language lead us to

ignore the alphabetic principle on which our written language is based? If it does, the eventual reaction to this neglect will bring demands for phonics instruction that, as they grow extreme, will create again the overemphasis on skills instruction that we are just now escaping.

Some of the champions of whole language tell us that whole language is not anti-phonics. Others interpret whole language as a total rejection of phonics. I think the former must be right, for without the alphabetic principle, written English is not whole. The alphabetic principle is one of the underlying rational principles that relates written English to spoken English, and a principle of all good teaching is that learning should be meaningful, not arbitrary; learning should make sense. The relationship of written language to spoken language should not be presented as arbitrary. The letters *m-o-m* constitute the word *mom* not just because Teacher says so or because *mom* fits the context, but because these letters represent the sounds of the language that compose the spoken word *mom*.

All of reading should make sense. The child should understand not just that written language conveys meaning but that the whole system of our written language is meaningful. But there is a great danger: because whole language is entering the scene in the guise of a replacement, many will interpret whole language as a total rejection of phonics, and the progression of fads will continue. To avoid returning to the excesses of the skills-based movement, we should continue to help students know and use the meaningful system that relates our written language to our spoken language.

Recently I accompanied a four-year-old girl on a trip downtown. She saw a sign larger than many of the others and asked me, "What does that say?"

"It says RESTAURANT," I told her.

She looked at the sign a little longer and declared, "I know how to spell RESTAURANT!"

What the child said sounds a little silly, but it isn't. She had expressed an emerging understanding of the phonemic nature of speech and of its

representation in written English. I was able to tell her quite honestly, "Nora, that's wonderful! You have learned the way words are written. You'll be able to read almost anything before long."

Fortunately, a reborn emphasis on writing will help counter the effects of programs that ignore phonics. Experience in writing can make many important contributions to the development of quick and accurate decoding. At a very basic level, constructing words with letters emphasizes the phonemic structure of language—that is, it clarifies that there is a sound system of the language that is represented in alphabetic writing. Writing also provides support for learning the specific relationships between phonemes and graphemes. At a higher level, of course, the experience of writing helps make clear how language may be structured to express ideas in writing.

Including All Good Writing

Like whole language, the "literature" movement comes with a built-in possibility for abuse: a narrow definition of literature. There is little room in some of the literature-based reading programs for writings about science, history, geography, economics, art, or music. This narrowing of the curriculum is occurring at a time when American students' illiteracy in science is generating national concern. It is vital to provide students with the reading experiences that will enable them to read a variety of nonfiction materials effectively. Reading science or mathematics requires a different type of effort, a different vocabulary, and familiarity with a different type of text structure than reading stories requires (MacGinitie 1985).

Many teachers read to their classes briefly after lunch or recess to share with their students the joy of reading and to help them become familiar with the structure and vocabulary of poems and stories. This activity is a sound use of the students' time, and it could and should be extended to reading about history, the sciences, the arts.

Perhaps the enthusiasm for literature will grow generous enough to

include all good writing. If the effect is to demand better written materials for children in history, science, and other fields, the emphasis on literature will have a double value. We shall see.

Almost predictably, good ideas in education are carried to such extremes that the ideas become deformed. A good idea grows grotesque and then dies out. Most of the good that the movement brought is lost, and a countertrend with its own abuses develops. The sad result is that, not only do children receive the best of each new trend in education, they also receive the worst—the abuses and the foolish extremes.

We owe our children more than half the best and half the worst. We need to embrace and retain the best of new-old trends in education. But we must also reject the excesses. As Paul the apostle counseled:

Do not quench the spirit, do not despise prophesying, but prove all things; hold fast that which is good (1 Thessalonians 5:19–21). □

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