

# A Balanced Early Literacy Curriculum: An Ecological Perspective

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Author's Note: *More than twenty-five years ago, as the new millennium approached, the Michigan Reading Association (MRA) and the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) asked Taffy Raphael and me to put together a monograph on Early Literacy Instruction for the New Millennium. This article was one of six published in the monograph. By the mid 1990's I had become increasingly concerned about the direction early reading instruction appeared to be heading. Unfortunately, my concerns proved to be legitimate. This article seems to be as relevant today as when originally published, but I'll leave it to present-day readers to decide. At the very least it counters the misconception too often heard today that a balanced literacy curriculum means no or minimal phonics instruction (see p.8).*

*I am indebted to my friend P David Pearson, who, when seeing an original draft, commented that this view was really an ecological rather than a fulcrum perspective of balance. I subsequently adopted the ecological terminology in the title. Enjoy the reading. wdh*

As we move into the new millennium, it is appropriate that we as educators pause to take stock of how we support the literacy development of young children. The debate of how best to teach young children to read and write has been a part of our legacy for an entire century. Literally thousands of articles, books, and monographs have been written on the subject. Particular books have served to heighten the debate, from *Why Johnny Can't Read* (Flesch, 1955) and *Learning to Read—The Great Debate* (Chall, 1967), to *Becoming A Nation of Readers* (Anderson et al., 1985) and the more recent *Beginning to Read* (Adams, 1990a).

Among the many issues discussed over the last four decades are the nature of the process, the nature of the learner, the complementary nature of learning to read and learning to write, and appropriate teaching methodologies. Two specific issues within this context have very much defined the debate: (a) the role of phonics in learning to read, and (b) the types of text and related materials used to teach children to read.

## Literacy in an Historical Perspective

Since the 1950s, the phonics pendulum has swung between one extreme of equating learning phonics with learning to read and the other extreme of seeing phonics as a minor contributor to reading acquisition. The text type issue has ranged from advocating word- or vocabulary-controlled readers (e.g., Look, look, see Sally, see Sally run), to experimenting with linguistic or grapheme-phoneme control (e.g., The fat cat sat, the cat ran), to augmenting or changing the alphabet, to sentence patterning or predictable books such as *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* (Martin, 1963). In some cases, one of these text types was the primary medium through which children learned to read. In other cases, different text types were used in various combinations. Each approach and each text type made particular assumptions about the process of learning to read.

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It is difficult to trace trends in literacy instruction historically, for they have never represented a singular movement. For example, during the middle to late 1980s and early 1990s, when whole language was very much in vogue, there remained pockets of intensive phonics instruction,

sometimes represented by a single teacher, a specific school or district, or a community of districts. Conversely, in the decade of the 1970s, when the vast majority of school districts used vocabulary-controlled basal readers, one could find teachers rejecting these methods and materials and teaching children to read using experience charts, library books, and writing with invented spellings. Despite this caveat, the pendulum swings can be described in the following manner. Beginning in the 1960s, our field has seen a concentrated effort to determine the most effective ways of teaching beginning reading with the twenty-seven federally-funded first-grade studies (see Barone, 1997). These studies were relatively inconclusive when analyzed as a whole, though individual studies provided important findings and conclusions. For example, one of the first-grade studies (Stauffer & Hammond, 1969) initiated a study of the effects of early writing with invented spellings on learning to read (see also Barone, 1997).

Jeanne Chall, in *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967), signaled—with her strong recommendation of code emphasis approaches—a greater emphasis on *breaking the code* programs. Intensive phonics programs became more popular, as did the practice of breaking reading into its smallest components for instructional purposes. The period from 1968 through 1975 was also a time in which teaching by specific objectives was promoted.

However, disenchantment with these approaches began to move the literacy pendulum back toward the center beginning in the mid 1970s. The late 1970s and early 1980s saw a renewed emphasis on reading comprehension, much of which can be attributed to the work at the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, under the direction of Richard C. Anderson.

Concurrently, there was an increased awareness of writing as a legitimate part of early literacy development (see Graves, 1983), and more attention was paid to the use of authentic children's literature and language-patterned and predictable books to teach young children to read. It was during this period in the 1980s that the whole language movement became popular in primary-grade classrooms.

Despite the major contributions of the whole language movement to the literacy process, this movement appears to have suffered from two unfortunate occurrences. Because of its child-centered focus, many teachers, school districts, and even entire states embraced whole language without understanding its underlying philosophy or the instructional strategies it encompassed. For example, it was not uncommon to talk to classroom teachers across the country who equated whole language with whole class teaching. Other teachers viewed whole language as primarily not using a basal reading program. Still others viewed whole language as teaching exclusively with novels or chapter books. For some teachers whole language meant not having to teach skills anymore. None of these views captured the essence of the whole language movement.

The second occurrence was that some whole language advocates appeared to have become too extreme by implying or directly stating that phonics instruction and word study simply weren't important and that direct teacher instruction might actually impede the natural literacy development of young children. These two factors—a lack of understanding of whole language by many who claimed to be using a whole language curriculum, and a reluctance of a select few whole language advocates to endorse phonics, word study, or focused teacher instruction—created a context for change.

The tide began to turn again with the publication of Marilyn Adams' (1990a) book, *Beginning to Read*. Adams advocated a very strong focus on phonemic awareness and phonics in the earliest stages of reading. She rejected the importance of such methodologies as using predictable books and experience charts as major contributors to learning to read (Adams,

1990b). This position on early literacy learning is having a significant effect on the profession today. Thus, our field has seen profound pendulum swings to the educational right, to the educational left, and back again over the past three decades. This trend continues today, and as we enter the 21st century, the debate continues within the profession between the many segments of the literacy community.

There is risk in characterizing our recent history in this manner. Clearly, one person's extremism is another's centrist position, and vice versa. There is little doubt, however, that there have historically been distinctly different emphases in literacy instruction and in our beliefs about how children learn to read. Some states and regions have been more immune to drastic shifts than others. Both California and Texas, two of our most populous states, seem to have been particularly susceptible to extreme changes in their views about literacy. One has only to examine the Texas Literacy Frameworks, respectively, of the late 1980s (see for example Texas Reading Proclamation, 1988) and their Literacy Frameworks of the middle to late 1990s (see for example Texas Reading Initiative, 1997) to note striking changes in the orientation, philosophy, and psychology of learning to read. Certainly we can disagree about which approach within these Frameworks is more appropriate, but it is difficult to ignore the dramatic differences that arise in just a few years. What was in vogue in 1988-89 is unacceptable today, and ideas viewed as enlightened positions in 1998-99 were wholly unacceptable just 8-10 years ago.

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A continuing dialogue and debate is healthy in any profession, but these extreme swings should cause the profession considerable concern. Some classroom teachers appear to be confused about what to believe and how best to teach reading. School and instructional leaders have been disadvantaged by an inability to build long term consistency and consensus among teaching staffs, to say nothing of the tremendous financial costs of procuring the newest materials and staff development consistent with the latest trends. Students have sometimes been disadvantaged by getting inconsistent instruction through the grades as they encounter teachers with widely divergent views of how to teach children to read and write. As a profession, we have been disadvantaged by appearing to the larger community of parents, business people, and professionals as though we don't know what we are doing (Levine, 1994). The teaching profession has been disadvantaged by the substantial energy used up in this debate on beginning reading when there are other literacy issues that desperately need our attention.

## What the Debate Is About

There are many issues that divide the literacy profession, ranging from the nature of the reading process and our theories about how individuals learn to the nature of the learners themselves. Four major issues on early literacy instruction illustrate the deep divisions within the profession. The first is whether learning to read is basically a linear process of learning, of focusing on one aspect of reading before moving on to another, or whether in learning to read several behaviors can occur simultaneously. Adams (1990a) appears to take the former position, asserting that phonemic awareness occurs first, then phonic instruction, which is basic. Later, she maintains, one can focus on comprehension. In

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contrast, Wells (1986), Holdaway (1979), Routman (1988), Weaver (1994) and others would argue for a more comprehensive approach to literacy instruction which would address not only phonics and word study but extensive reading, writing, and attention to comprehension from the very beginning. These contrasting views appear to be incompatible. Whichever position one adopts will in large measure define the context and character of one's early literacy program.

A second issue that is basic to the debate is the role of context in early reading, specifically the role of context on word recognition and word processing. Adams (1990), Perfetti & Zhang (1996) and Lyon (1998) represent a view that context effects are minimal in learning to read, even in the early stages of the process. For example, Perfetti (1997), referring to early reading instruction, writes, "It is misleading to focus... on such side issues as context, comprehension, or even getting meaning from print.... These commonly cited goals are not the heart of what learning to read is all about" (pp. 56-57).

In a recent article, Lyon (1998) points out that research has demonstrated that context has little effect on word and text processing. However, a reading of the original Gough et al. (1981) research referred to by Lyon indicates that their subjects were adult and college students who were skilled readers, not five-, six-, and seven-year-olds at the early stages of literacy. Moreover, Gough et al. looked at context at the single phrase or sentence level, not connected discourse. The limitations of the Gough et al. study in terms of adult subjects and the reading materials used is indeed sobering. It raises an important question about whether one can generalize about the reading behaviors of young children from research done on adult subjects.

Interestingly, it is difficult to persuade practicing teachers that context does not facilitate word recognition and word processing, given their extensive experience seeing the facilitating effects. This suggests a contrast between some researchers and teachers working with students. The context issue is central because it defines both theory and practice. How we address the context issue dramatically affects the strategies used in the classroom, the types of materials used, and the assessment procedures implemented. Those who argue for context effects suggest that readers' background experiences or schemata and their intuitive knowledge about language facilitate text and word-level processing even at the earliest stages. In this view, meaning is not only the goal of reading; it is also one of the means or processes by which readers actually learn to read. In other words, reading for meaning even in the earliest stages makes learning to read easier. The division is particularly strong on the context effects issue.

A third issue that divides our profession is the extent to which reading is a natural or unnatural act. Lyon (1998) argues that learning to read is unnatural. Goodman (1992), on the other hand, argues that reading is very much a natural act. Again, we see strongly divergent views. Instead of engaging in a debate about whether learning to read is or is not a natural act, perhaps we'd do better to ask, "To what extent can we make learning to read more of a natural

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act through curriculum design and instructional strategies?" Is it possible to engage young readers in literacy learning experiences that seem natural or less arbitrary to the learner? Literacy activities such as experience stories, in which students share experiences that teachers record in the natural language of the learners and then encourage children to read their own ideas in their language patterns, certainly appear to promote reading as a natural process. Allowing children to write their own stories and express their ideas through invented spelling seems natural to most anyone who spends time observing language-rich and meaning-based first-grade classrooms.

Moreover, it is natural for young children to read predictable texts, using repetitive language patterns and pictures to support the early reading process. It is natural for young readers to use pictures to help give them a sense of what the text is about. It is also natural for young children entering school to want to learn to read. That desire, motivation, and excitement should not be squandered in the early days and months of school.

Not all parts of learning to read are natural. The code itself, particularly many letter-sound correspondences, is arbitrary and indeed confusing to the young learner. If, therefore, the vast portion of early reading centers around this arbitrary and unnatural code, then children are likely to experience learning to read as an unnatural act. If, however, one capitalizes on the child's experiences, the language facility and the predisposition to make meaning, as Wells (1986) has demonstrated, then reading seems more natural to the young learner. This is another important reason to advocate a multidimensional and balanced approach to literacy learning.

The fourth major issue that defines our view of early literacy is the concept of *automaticity*—namely, that word recognition must be accurate, rapid and require little conscious attention so that attention can be directed to the comprehension process. Indeed, the concept of automaticity, as articulated by LaBerge and Samuels (1974), is a helpful one. One reason students may not comprehend text is that they are spending all of their energy and attention on figuring out the words. The remedy by some reading authorities is to spend more time on word study until word recognition becomes automatic. However, the road to automaticity must be more than a focus on phonics or decoding. One approach is through word study. But other approaches are effective, such as providing students with text that is familiar and predictable. Also, it is likely that extensive early writing with invented or approximate spelling helps establish and automatize phoneme-grapheme relationships, thus contributing indirectly to automaticity in reading. Samuels (1979) recognized the efficacy of repeated reading strategies in promoting automaticity. Thus, very early in the learning-to-read process, attention should be paid to fluency with a variety of instructional activities.

Another issue that is raised with the concept of automaticity is the implication that once automaticity is reached, comprehension will naturally or likely follow. Many experienced teachers in primary, intermediate, and middle schools make this assumption erroneously. Many teachers can cite examples of students who are fluent and automatic (i.e., sound good when they read aloud) but fail to construct meaning and comprehend text. There may be a variety of reasons why this happens. It is possible is that our young students are not receiving enough instruction in effective comprehension strategies, or are being asked to read texts that are not potentially meaningful. Another plausible explanation for the numbers of students who can decode but fail to construct meaning and comprehend text is that learning to read in the early stages may not have been seen by learners as an act of constructing meaning. If children spend the majority of their time in the early grades focusing primarily on phonics activities, learning about individual letter sounds or words, and are consistently urged to sound it out when reading text, their view of what reading is may be skewed.

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In summary, one's stand on these four issues—(a) the foundations of the learning-to-read process, (b) the effects or noneffects of context, (c) the extent to which educators can make learning to read natural, and (d) the concept of automaticity—determines how one structures the literacy curriculum for young learners.

## Why Balanced Literacy Instruction Is Important

Balance in early literacy instruction is important for several reasons. Studies have shown that a balanced literacy curriculum produces the best results. This was demonstrated in our early studies in first and second grade (Stauffer & Hammond, 1969; Stauffer, 1970), as well as in our recent work with two elementary schools in Ferndale, Michigan, between 1994 and 1997. In thirty years of working closely with primary-grade teachers in many schools and several cultures, I have concluded that a balanced curriculum produces more and better readers over both the short and long term. Highly effective

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primary-grade teachers balance instruction from the earliest days of school by engaging young children in meaningful text through the use of experience charts and predictable books. They engage children in writing on a daily basis. They teach phonics and word study in both a focused and informal manner. They provide many opportunities for repetition through shared reading, choral reading, and repeated reading activities. They talk with children about stories and ideas and words in a language- and print-rich environment. These are the teachers who, year after year, seem to produce outstanding literacy performances from their young students.

It should not surprise us that a balanced curriculum is so essential, because reading is a multidimensional process. Anderson et al.'s *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985) describes skilled readers as constructive, strategic, fluent, motivated, and lifelong. As we read, we use our prior knowledge, decipher print, access word meanings, interpret, evaluate, reflect, anticipate—all in a relatively rapid manner. Some behaviors are dependent upon other behaviors. Reading is a multifaceted process, and learning to read has been likened to learning to ride a bicycle, in that several actions and behaviors occur simultaneously or recursively. Learning to read does not lend itself to a series of small incremental steps presented in a linear fashion. If reading is a multifaceted process, it makes sense that its instruction be multifaceted as well.

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Another reason balance is so important is that it capitalizes on the nature of the learner. Unfortunately, this factor may not be taken into account sufficiently when building a model for early literacy. Young children bring a wealth of competencies and behaviors to the learning-to-read equation. As Wells (1986) points out, children by kindergarten age are quite competent in language usage. They usually exhibit the basic grammatical sentence patterns of mature speech—an amazing feat in four or five short years. In addition, young children are naturally curious and have a drive or desire to

make sense of their world and the activities in which they are engaged. There is solid empirical evidence that young children are skilled meaning makers.

Therefore, there are two implications for curriculum specialists in recognizing the nature of the learners. First, children want to engage in reading and literacy activities that result in meaning making—reading stories, asking questions about stories, and interpreting text and pictures, as well as writing personal and meaningful messages. From the very beginning, the content of reading activities needs, in large measure, to be meaning-based. Second, young children need to see that the classroom activities and lessons in which they are engaging are leading to something meaningful. In other words, when learners begin to wonder why they are doing a certain task, their commitment and energy begin to wane.

A balanced curriculum can address these issues by building on the natural language and meaning-making ability of the learner. Those literacy activities that are less meaningful to the child are better learned in the context of a balanced curriculum. For those of us who work in and observe primary classrooms, there is little doubt that capitalizing on the learners' strengths produces results in achievement as well as an attitude, energy, and work ethic which have a significant impact on literacy development. The idea of balance is not a new one. Heilman (1993) cautions us about imbalance when he writes:

To make reasonable progress, the beginning reader must acquire three closely related skills.

- Mastering and applying letter-sound relationships
- Enlarging sight vocabulary
- Profiting from context clues while reading

Beginning reading instruction is so important because it is here that children develop a sense of what reading is. It is not good instruction to devote the first few months of reading to one of the above skills while ignoring the other two. This kind of approach will confuse a child regarding the true nature of the reading process.... Early instruction should help learners develop the insight that these three skills complement each other in helping to crack the two codes—word identification and meaning. The only way children can miss the fact that reading is a meaning-making process is to receive instruction that masks this fact. (pp. 24-25)

These are wise words indeed. In fact, Heilman, who arguably has written the most popular and enduring books on phonics, deems balance so important that he has cautioned his literacy colleagues about this issue in each of the nine editions of his book, written between 1963 and 1999.

In summary, the case for balance is a strong one. Balanced literacy curricula recognize the multifaceted behavior of learning to read. Balanced curricula capitalize on the nature of the learner as a language learner who has a predisposition to make sense of his or her world. Balanced curricula produce in young readers the idea that reading is about making sense and constructing meaning, an insight that will serve them well as they move through the intermediate and upper grades.

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## **Balanced Literacy—A View Into the Classroom**

Balance can be viewed from various perspectives. One perspective that is particularly helpful is that of a primary classroom of young learners. The central question is, what kinds of activities and learning experiences would a teacher and a classroom of first-grade students engage in over several school days? A related question focuses not only on the what, but on the why. Within the context of an early literacy classroom, there is one dominant and limiting factor— instructional time.

Therefore, one must construct a curriculum where instructional time is finite. In any classroom, teachers have to set priorities about what will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be taught. Figure 13 includes a combination of instructional experiences, all designed to promote growth in literacy. The elements are shown in a circle and represent what one might reasonably see occurring in a typical primary school classroom. The divisions between the components are fluid and modifiable.

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The literacy experiences depicted in Figure 13 are highly interrelated. Included in this illustration are activities that address language development, word recognition, fluency, comprehension, writing, exposure to literature, and the development of concepts about how young readers need to think about reading and writing through metacognitive activities. In some activities, the child works under direct teacher guidance in small groups; in other instances, the young learners work cooperatively with peers. On other occasions, the learner works independently under indirect teacher guidance. This is a picture of a well-organized classroom fostering a high level of interest and energy.

The circle represents the constant— instructional time. Therefore, if a teacher chooses to increase the amount of time on any one activity, he or she must reduce the time designated for some other activity. To a limited degree, of course, such tradeoffs are acceptable and may even be encouraged. However, there is a point where the tradeoffs may be so excessive that they become detrimental. Once the instructional experiences are significantly out of balance, literacy development is likely impeded.



Figure 13 A Balanced Literacy Curriculum

I believe five points are relevant to understanding this figure of the Balanced Literacy Curriculum. First, the circle does not represent one day in a first- or second-grade classroom. However, over the course of several days, all or nearly all of these instructional components should be observed. Second, the instructional mix within the circle is different for different masterful teachers. Third, the mix changes relatively significantly through the kindergarten, first, and second-grade experience. Fourth, as in any effective literacy classroom, a number of activities usually occur concurrently. Fifth, and most importantly, the circle represents a perspective, not a prescription.

As one examines the suggested components presented in the circle of instruction, it is appropriate to ask by what means and to what extent any one component contributes to literacy development. In Figure 14, I list how selected components or elements contribute to the learning-to-read process.

Each component makes significant contributions to the learning to read process. Moreover, there is redundancy built into the system. For example, several instructional strategies address



the learning and application of phonics. Phonics is learned through focused instruction, but phonics is also learned and significantly reinforced through writing with invented spellings and through extensive reading experiences with predictable text, experience charts, and repeated readings. Several of the components address fluency, and several address comprehension (i.e., the constructing of meaning from text). Removing one or more of these instructional components in order to spend time on one or even two or three components may have deleterious effects on the learning-to-read process.

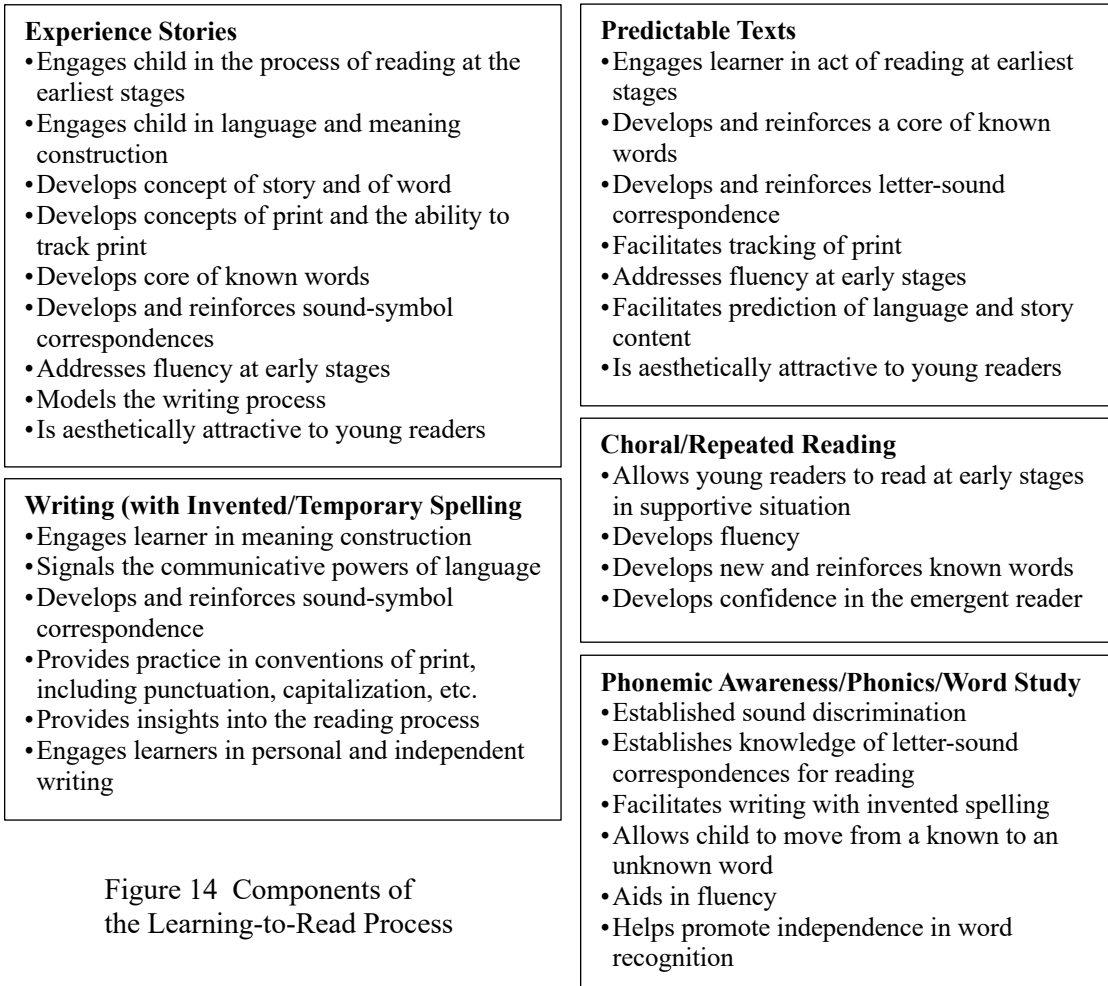


Figure 14 Components of the Learning-to-Read Process

## The Role of Phonics

The phonics component of a balanced literacy curriculum is the most controversial and deserves to be addressed in greater depth. This is not to suggest, however, that the phonics component is any more important than the other elements in a balanced literacy curriculum. Three questions guide my discussion of the role of phonics in learning to read: (a) What kind of phonics? (b) How much phonics? and (c) When should phonics be taught?

## **What Kind of Phonics?**

In the simplest terms, there are two primary approaches to phonics instruction: *analytic* and *synthetic*. Analytic phonics involves analyzing common elements with words—*fish*, *fox*, and *fan* begin alike with the letter *f*; *bake*, *cake*, and *rake* all rhyme. The words *ball* and *well* end with the same two letters. In this approach, sounds are studied primarily in the context of words. However, they are taught directly and explicitly. In a synthetic approach to phonics instruction, students are taught individual letter sounds—*b* has a *buh* sound, *a* an *ah* sound, and *t* a *tuh* sound. One then blends or synthesizes these sounds together—bah-ah-tuh, /b/a/t/, bat.

More recently, in the mid-1980s, the two approaches were renamed. Synthetic phonics is now referred to as explicit phonics, and analytic phonics is referred to as implicit phonics. The new labels may be unfortunate, for one can teach analytic phonics just as explicitly as one can teach synthetic phonics. It is difficult to ascertain whether the explicit terminology refers to the “isolation of sounds” or to a method of teaching, or both. Somehow, in this renewed focus on phonics issues, the debate about the kind or type of phonics instruction to be used in classrooms has not received the attention it warrants.

## **How Much Phonics Should Be Taught?**

In my work with Stauffer on one of the first-grade studies commissioned by the United States Office of Education in the 1960s, we recommended that an average of twenty to twenty-five minutes a day be devoted to phonics, word study, or word recognition instruction in first- and second-grade classrooms (Stauffer, 1969; Stauffer & Hammond, 1969). Sometimes phonics was taught in a focused, direct manner; at other times, phonics was taught in the context of other literacy activities. Interestingly, instruction began with a heavy concentration of auditory discrimination activities, which are the basis of phonemic awareness in the 1990s. However, we did not find the blending or segmentation activities that are so popular today to be a necessary component. In those early days, we were mindful that teachers not spend so much time on phonics and word recognition activities that other crucial components of the curriculum would be minimized or eliminated. The achievement results spoke for themselves as reported in the study (Stauffer & Hammond, 1969). Thirty years later there seems to be no persuasive evidence that phonics instruction, important though it is, should be the dominating instructional activity in a balanced curriculum.

## **When Should Phonics Be Taught?**

Part of the debate about when phonics should be taught is whether teachers should begin with phonemic awareness prior to other experiences or engagement with literacy instruction. In the award winning Ayres (1993) study, kindergarten students who had language experiences and exposure to predictable books and Big Books first, and were then instructed in phonemic awareness, were more successful in literacy development than students who began with intensive phonemic awareness training. Based on this research, we can conclude that phonemic awareness and phonics are best taught in the context of, or concurrently with, other language and literacy experiences. The Ayres (1993) study, conducted in Michigan classrooms, makes a strong case for a balanced literacy curriculum.

In brief, phonics as an either/or proposition is far from simple. The type of phonics used, the amount of instructional time devoted to phonics instruction, and the timing of that instruction are critical issues that must be addressed.

## Concluding Comment

The issue of how best to teach young children to read and write has been with us for more than a century. As we move into the twenty-first century, educators—both researchers and practitioners—must establish a common ground on this issue. No side or position should co-opt the “we are the scientists” mantra, nor should any side or position claim they have a monopoly on the humanist “we care more about children” perspective. Such posturing is counterproductive. There is room for healthy and civil debate, and most importantly, careful attention to anyone who can make a contribution.

This paper stresses a balanced curriculum for all students. My plea is that balance is particularly essential to the students who are our greatest challenges. These are the very students, the at-risk students, who need a multidimensional, interactive, and redundant literacy curriculum. These students cannot be relegated to a narrow one-dimensional approach, whatever that approach might be.

Clearly this is a confusing and contentious time as we enter the new millennium, even for those of us who have devoted most or all of our careers to literacy issues. Imagine the confusion of many school leaders and classroom teachers who don’t have the luxury of focusing every working hour on literacy issues. Moreover, when the public at large sees divisiveness within our profession, our credibility is questioned.

Too often we have seen the pendulum swing from one extreme to the other in literacy programs. The pendulum has swung from an emphasis on excessive skills and drills to a view that reading is simply a case of immersing students into a literacy environment—from part learning to whole learning and back again. These continuing debates on early literacy and the role of phonics have distracted our profession from other critical literacy issues. For example, we need to focus on the nature of critical reading and reading comprehension as it relates to intermediate, middle, and secondary students. We need to consider the role and nature of literacy in a technological society, and the meaning of being a highly literate adult. We need to concentrate on the role of reading and writing in the self-actualization of children and adults, as well as the role of literacy in helping societies to remain free and democratic. This is only a partial list of the issues that require our professional attention.

That is why this article and the others in this monograph call for a balanced perspective. We feel balance is essential to providing the correct mix of educational experiences that will maximize learning and ensure that every child in the next millennium will be a thoughtful, critical, constructive, fluent, strategic, motivated, lifelong reader and writer.

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