Phonics Teaching A La Whole Language

By Patrick Groff
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The most descriptive account of what must be taken as the “official” position of the “whole language” (WL) approach to reading development, vis-a-vis phonics teaching, has arrived: Looking Closely: Exploring the Role of Phonics in One Whole Language Classroom (NCTE, 1992) by Heidi Mills, Timothy O’Keefe, and Diane Stephens. Whole language celebrity Jerome Harste, in his forward to this volume, concedes that prior to its appearance there had not been a “sane and practical discussion of the role of phonics in good whole language classrooms” (p. viii). As will be discussed, a whole language classroom is a “bad” one if it does not follow the practices described in Looking Closely.

Before its publication, the manuscript of this book was reviewed and approved of by yet other luminaries of the WL movement: Carolyn Burke, Yetta Goodman, Judith Newman, and Constance Weaver. Whole Language watchers will recognize these names as superstars of the movement. The issuance of Looking Closely by the National Council of Teachers of English further distinguishes the book’s position as the duly certified and authorized, and therefore up-to-date version of how phonics teaching should be conducted in WL programs. It is clear that NCTE has committed itself to propagating “good” WL practices. In fact, it no longer publishes any negative criticisms of WL practices—whether “good” or “bad.” We thus will not see a 69 page explanation of direct and systematic phonics teaching from NCTE in the foreseeable future.

Although Looking Closely deals only with phonics teaching administered in a single WL classroom, universal application is strongly implied by its authors: The “whole language philosophy works well for all ages and populations” (p. 1), we are advised. Also, since this book has received verification from among the most famous of the WL regents, it must be assumed that it is offered as an instructional guide.

It is apparent immediately from Looking Closely that what it recommends about phonics teaching has some usefulness, but is never sufficient for this purpose. For example, one can find no critic of WL who opposes the idea “that children have ample opportunities to engage with texts and to learn through that engagement” (p. xii). The accusation, from the past, that direct and systematic phonics instruction only prepares children to read words as isolated items, and not in...
texts, also has lost all its credibility—if it actually information is sufficient, and that most phonics information should be gained by children on a personal basis. This book was written, its authors Fundamentally, insists that phonics information should be gained by children on a personal basis. This book was written, its authors further explain, to assuage the apprehensions they admit many teachers have truly will learn enough phonics phonics information through the happenstance teaching of phonics entailed in WL. Through a series of anecdotes of how incidental, spur-of-the-moment phonics claim to “illustrate that children do develop an understanding of letter-sound relations” while in WL classrooms (p. 65).

Here is a prime example of the “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” or evidence upon which WL bases its legitimacy. observe its use with children; and (3) I judge that these practices are successful. No standardization, independent tests of phonics knowledge before evidence does not mean, however, that the use of direct and systematic teaching of phonics information precludes the exercise of all incidental teaching for this purpose. Preplanned phonics lessons, based on a hierarchy of skills that range from the least to the most difficult to learn, do not exclude the likelihood that unexpected opportuni-

the “reading-writing strategies” that Closely by WL teachers. Thus, providing many opportunities for children to write their names, to play phonics games, to sing alphabet songs, to share what they have learned, to write their compositions and pen pal letters, and to engage in independent reading time

stressed, apprehensions they admit many teachers have truly will learn enough phonics information through the happenstance teaching of phonics are unique to WL, their use by WL tends to disguise or otherwise camouflage the dangerous aspects of WL. In this regard, there is no experimental WL’s on this issue is rejected, as in Closely, can a case for the basically incidental teaching of phonics be made to appear justified.

It is noticeable, further, that even the incidental instruction as recommended by Looking Closely is deficient. For instance, it is related here that “Tony” writes macking for making. Teacher: “How did you learn to write ‘making’?” Tony: “I’ve seen you put ck at the end of words.” No further comment from the teacher is advised. Then, Tony: “Hey, if you cover the t in the it becomes he.” (p. 9). Again, no comment from the teacher is urged. Elsewhere, the teacher should be pleased if children think Tony and the begin the way skills that range from the least to the most difficult to learn, do not exclude the likelihood that unexpected opportuni-

By not interposing the superior knowledge about phonics information that Looking Closely declares WL teachers inevitably possess, these teachers deliberately refuse to inform pupils such a “Tony” why certain of their conclusions about phonics information are in error. But if all WL teachers know so much about phonics, why are they so reluctant to teach it to their students?

The answer, simply stated, is the ideological supposition in WL that “children learn about reading by reading” (p. vii), and not by the study of isolated parts of words. Parenthetically, it must be noted that while this maxim is repeated often in
Looking Closely, some examples of the phonics teaching that it approves of violate this tenet.

Nonetheless, in principle at least, this book heartily defends the notion that children must be allowed to “learn what they need to learn” about phonics information (p. 2). Therefore, it goes on, the reading curriculum, instead of being prearranged, must be constantly shaped and reshaped with each new insight or question found among each of the 30-odd members of the typical class. The “formal, planned experiences” alluded to in Looking CZoseZy (p. 63) thus merely arrange for a learning environment; they are not designed for “direct instruction that focuses on the set of rules establishing the relationship between sounds of letters and their names” (p.xi).

It thus is held as better that pupils accidentally or fortuitously come across some bit of phonics information, then recognize on their own its usefulness for the identification of written words, than for teachers to provide this information directly and systematically. Children learn phonics best, Looking CZoseZy accordingly maintains, “when teachers function as participants, guides, and learners in their classrooms” (p.63), and not as careful planners and directors of the learning process.

In addition, Looking CZoseZy must be faulted for its rejection of the pertinent experimental findings about the appropriateness of urging beginning readers to use context cues to recognize unfamiliar words. The book is proud of “Tony” in this respect: “When Tony was asked what he did when he came to a word that he did not know, he replied, ‘All I do is look at the words to make sense of the other words.’ “ (p. 62).

Unfortunately, such reinforcement of beginning readers’ expedient use of context cues delays their advance toward the quick and accurate (automatic) recognition of words. (Nothing relates more closely to reading comprehension.) As my review of the experimental research on context cues reveals (Groff, in press), “observations that beginning readers depend heavily on context cues for word recognition should not be interpreted to mean that this practice should be reinforced in children learning to read. To the contrary, the modern evidence notes that able, mature readers recognize written words automatically and thus make little use of context cues,” except for deciding which connotation of a word an author intended. Whole language thus poses another threat—this one against the proficient comprehension of written materials.

Looking CZoseZy is one more example of the pressure from literacy development organizations, in this case the NCTE, on schools to adopt WL as it is set out by the leaders of this movement. Teachers who are forced against their better judgements to work in WL schools can console themselves, however, of one thing, that WL despite its defects can be taken as a helpful reminder to use incidental teaching of phonics information, and as many supplemental literacy-related activities as possible. Some teachers in this circumstance also have concluded that if their school administrators demand that their reading program be called WL, but yet will still allow them to teach phonics in a direct and systematic way, that they will go along with the sham without protest. Good phonics teachers historically often have been required to make such compromises. These teachers know that undocumented fads in education eventually suffer a natural death over the course of time. Whole language will be no exception.

Reference


Why Our Schools Won’t Teach Johnny to Read

Deborah Howes

The ability to form abstract thoughts...is now seen as a consequence of the brain’s learning to read.

The Amazing Brain
Toronto Star, May 2, 1993

As adults living in one of the more comfortable, prosperous and democratic countries on earth we trust that reason and intellect will prevail. Parents would like to take for granted that their children are afforded a good education. Why then are the people in charge of our educational system committing a treacherous
act by ensuring that our teachers digest literature against the most reliable and solid method of teaching our children to read: Phonics. Why won’t our schools teach Johnny to read?

Simply put, the teaching of phonics, specifically, whereby children are taught the spelling to sound correspondences in the early grades in a step-by-step manner produces superior readers. Further, children seldom fail to learn to read with this approach.

The strongest support to date for this comes from the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois. In 1987 the U.S. Department of Education was mandated by the U.S. Congress to review the existing research on phonics instruction. Marilyn Adams, a distinguished reading expert formerly with the Center, was commissioned to carry out the task. Her findings cannot be ignored. The message is clear: To deny children systematic instruction in the sounds of letters and spelling patterns (phonics) in teaching beginning reading is a failure to educate, which is nothing short of a crime against the innocent.

What has gone wrong? Our children have fallen victim to the whole language philosophy for teaching beginning reading, currently in use, which has a strong anti-phonics message running through its central core. Hence, the whole language literature that teachers-in-training are expected to read is vehemently opposed to the explicit, systematic instruction of phonics.

Whole language philosophy monopolizes our Canadian schools. It can be likened to a religious cult because of its followers’ zealous faith; they refuse to acknowledge the scientific research on how teaching explicit systematic phonics produces superior readers and how whole language classrooms which exclude this from beginning reading instruction can lead to serious reading problems for children.

This anti-intellectual attitude is not surprising however considering that the educational bureaucrats and academic institutions who endorse it. The Canadian Ministries of Education and University Faculties of Education insure, in their policies, that teachers in Canada do not receive their teaching certificate until they have digested literature against the teaching of phonics. Such literature portrays the direct teaching of phonics as a meaningless endeavor that would interfere with learning to read and leave children emotionally scarred.

The Ministries and Boards have elected two major whole language spokesmen who ensure that this type of literature is firmly indoctrinated in the minds of teachers. Teachers are then responsible for making sure that children do not receive systematic instruction in letter/spelling pattern-to-sound, hence phonics, when learning to read.

These two spokesmen are Ken Goodman, a University of Georgia psychologist, known as the whole language guru, and Frank Smith, a former newspaper reporter, magazine editor, novelist, and experimental psychologist.

Both Goodman’s and Smith’s contemptuous remarks about the teaching of phonics form the fabric of Canadian Ministry guidelines for teaching reading. With zero research evidence to substantiate their attacks on phonics instruction, and vast distortions of the truth, a demand for a serious government investigation into this matter is urgent.

Some of the most irrational attacks on the teaching of phonics are found in a book by Goodman entitled What’s Whole in Whole Language, published by Scholastic Canada. It is intended as a guide for teaching reading and is required course material at many teacher colleges across Canada. In it Goodman implies that the explicit teaching of phonics is both racist and pathological, claiming that children receiving phonics instruction are left with emotional scars.

Here are some excerpts from the book:

“Phonics programs can’t deal with dialect differences unless they acknowledge that each dialect has a different set of phonics rules.”

“They (teachers) believe all children have language and the ability to learn language, and they reject negative, elitist, racist views of linguistic purity that would limit children to arbitrary ‘proper’ language.”

Let’s get one thing clear up front. It is not the intention of phonics to instruct children in the Queen’s English. A teacher in the deep south of Georgia will sound quite different from a teacher in Toronto during a grade one session in phonics instruction. Goodman’s ‘racist’ implication then appears to be nothing more than a grasping at...
politically correct straws. To suggest that the teaching of phonics has anything to do with trying to create some sort of global ‘proper’ dialect reeks of a type of corrupt indoctrination technique.

How could the individuals who represent our educational establishment expose teachers to literature opposing the teaching of phonics? Why aren’t teachers provided the opportunity to become educated in the latest research on reading? Surely medical students must read the latest medical research.

Phonics instruction is a means for introducing children to the secret behind reading an alphabetic script—the letter (spelling) patterns of the words that make up our language. Teaching children that words are made up of letter patterns that have corresponding sounds which occur across all words familiarizes them with the spelling patterns which make up words. Marilyn Adams’ synthesis of the research on how the brain accomplishes fluent reading clearly demonstrates that this information (spelling patterns) is something our brains will need to encode as orthographic (letter sequences) and auditory (sound) memory units. This information enables whole words to be recognized in a fraction of a second.

Memory units work in conjunction with the meaning of the word one is looking at. Therefore when reading the sentence ‘Do you hear the bear,’ we don’t mix up the words hear and bear and reverse the sound patterns of the spelling pattern e-ar. We do not read it as, ‘Do you hair the beer?’ Without this wonderful orchestration of events in place, fluent reading cannot take place. Sight, sound and meaning are intimately connected. But although our mind has the ability to impose the sense (context, grammatical structure and life to what we read) we are all at the mercy of the print before our eyes. We can’t even begin to understand what we are reading unless we get those words off the page. Research in cognitive science, the study of how the brain processes information, is quite clear in these findings, and the field of neuro-science, the study of the language centers of the brain, supports this.

The teaching of spelling-to-sound correspondences (phonics) then, is tied-in precisely with how the brain is set up to process an alphabetic script. Children move from consciously getting the spelling patterns (words) off the page first so that the brain can eventually take over on an automatic, unconscious level of fluent reading ability.

Equally important is that systematic phonics instruction in the early grades provides children with a sense of order and logic to work with, something concrete to hang onto.

But so far it appears that the people in charge, Ministries and Boards of Education don’t acknowledge this research. They refuse to acknowledge it presumably because the anecdotal research supporting whole language weighs greater in their minds than the scientific evidence refuting it.

Recently, on TV Ontario, a Director of Education in Northern Ontario commented on the video ‘Failing Grades’ wherein research to support phonics instruction is presented. This Director stated that the argument that teaching phonics to solve our literacy problem was tainted. He went on to argue that what we need to teach are critical thinking skills. Teaching phonics is not incompatible with teaching critical thinking skills. On the contrary, critical thinking skills evolve out of the ability to read, and the ability to read is achieved through the teaching of phonics. Unfortunately, this Director’s response is representative of the majority of our educational establishment.

Needless to say, the messages that teachers in training in Canada are exposed to represent both the decline of modern education and the decay of intellectualism—the proliferation of a generation of educators who no longer think for themselves. There are reasons of course for not thinking for oneself and therefore becoming a blind disciple. One may be brainwashed and therefore have a built-in excuse. (Many young, impressionable teachers in training today have fallen victim to this scenario.) Or, one may not want to risk one’s job for financial reasons and so continue to turn the other cheek. And then there are people, no doubt, whose beliefs are so much a part of their person that they have lost the ability to interpret incoming information any other way than their vision of the world. But to decide to jump on the bandwagon and follow the crowd of people who are clearly ignoring the evidence is to abdicate responsibility and decide not to live a full life. It is possible that this latter group account for the majority of individuals in education today.

Goodman’s book ‘What’s Whole in Whole Language’ has become the bible of Ministry guidelines across Canada, with Ontario, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Nova Scotia citing the book as a direct reference in the development of their
curriculum guidelines for teaching reading. In Alberta, a 1991 Ministry publication, entitled *Parents ask about Language Learning*—intended to answer parents’ questions about teaching reading—suggests that parents purchase Goodman’s book so they may “further explore” how children learn to read. Walk into the Manitoba Text Book Bureau and you can purchase a carload of teacher reference materials for teaching reading, filled to the brim with Goodman’s literature against the direct teaching of phonics, spelling and grammar. The Ontario Ministry guidelines for assessing language arts 1991 publication even allows Goodman to write his own chapter wherein he grants a tribute to children who have “learned to read in spite of the obstacles (phonics) placed in their way.”

Teaching children to read through the practice of dividing words up into spelling patterns so they can sound out words is a cardinal sin within whole language philosophy and hence our Ministries of Education pass legislation ensuring that this sin is not violated. In the curriculum guideline published by the Ontario Ministry of Education, 1990, entitled, ‘Junior Division Language Arts’ (book 111) it states: “Whole, meaningful materials are the instructional fabrics of the classroom, not isolated words, sounds, or controlled vocabulary stories.” The same philosophy is echoed in Ministry curriculum guidelines across Canada.

Indeed the Ministry guidelines serve to police the schools so phonics is never taught explicitly and systematically. This ensures that dividing words up into sound patterns for analysis never becomes the core program used to teach reading. Instead the following attitude prevails: “Hey Johnny you seem to be having problems. Did we mention that usually when two vowels go walking the first one does the talking.” Without a doubt the justification for this anti-phonics policing comes in the form of horror stories, by Goodman, against the direct teaching of phonics.

Witness some more damaging remarks in Goodman’s book *What’s Whole in Whole Language*:

> “Whole, relevant, meaningful language can help them (children) move away from next-word fear, phonics, and word attacks...In such contexts, they will gradually reveal to themselves and their teachers the strengths that have been hidden by the heavy layer of their own defeatism, brought on by inappropriate overuse of word-attack skills.”

*But it will take time. Their scars are deep; the effect of years of pathological treatment and remediation will not wear off easily.*

Goodman’s anti-phonics messages are a clear attempt at a crude emotional appeal to educators to adopt his philosophy.

Frank Smith, the other major Ministry spokesman, should have stuck to writing fiction. He builds a case against the teaching of phonics seductively by filling teachers heads with strange ideas about how fluent reading is achieved. Smith describes his ideal world of beginning reading instruction in one of his most popular books *Reading Without Nonsense* published in 1985, used as a guide at many universities to ‘educate’ teachers in training. In this ideal world he would have teacher’s encouraging children to “depend upon the eyes as little as possible.” Any intelligent human being after having read the research would have to conclude that this practice would actually sabotage the brain’s ability to lock in the spelling patterns to memory as units of information needed for rapid word recognition to take place.

Another one of Smith’s fantasies only serves to implant the false notion that basic literacy skills are served up in a sweet sauce through the magic absorption of words. In the same book *Reading Without Nonsense* he devotes a whole section denigrating any form of phonics instruction entitled “The Fallacy of Phonics.” He states: “Once a child discovers what a word is in a meaningful context, learning to recognize it on another occasion is as simple as learning to recognize a face on a second occasion, and does not need phonics.”

If this were true would we have a literacy problem in North America? Such naive and simplistic thinking calls up memories of past generations who believed that the earth was at the center of the universe and all bodies revolved around it. But at least there was an excuse—there was no scientific evidence to prove otherwise at the time.

Smith’s messages are dangerous. Indeed he gets the award for creating one of the strongest anti-phonics movements this century has known.

In one of his poplar books *Insult to Intelligence*, published in 1986 by Scholastic Canada, intended for teachers in training, Smith refers to the Center for the Study of Reading (where the
most up-to-date research on reading has demonstrated the superiority of phonics instruction), as the “Nonsense Industry”, to grades as “the kiss of death”, and to teaching the alphabet to pre-readers as “sheer jabberwocky.” This last comment just plain slaps good science in the face since the speed at which pre-readers can name the letters of the alphabet is a strong predictor of their future reading success.

Smith also claims that while reading “We read words without reading letters, and read meanings without reading words” because our brains only need to identify “distinctive features” of words (bits and pieces of the shapes of words).

The ‘distinctive features’ myth has become so prevalent that the Ontario Ministry 1990 Curriculum guideline for assessing language arts states that “Proficient readers, or even beginning readers, if the contextual cues are strong enough, sample only a fraction of the visual array that is available in the text. This fraction might include initial consonants or word endings or some combination of the distinctive features of the words. Very rarely does proficient reading involve a letter-by-letter, or even a word-by-word, sampling of the print.”

In fact the opposite is true. Fluent reading does not exist unless the eyes, and hence brain, take in each and every letter of every word in the form of spelling patterns. The automaticity of this is precisely what allows comprehension to occur. This is a fact, plain and simple, as can be verified by contacting the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois or the U.S. Department of Education.

Ironically, Smith’s ‘distinctive features’ fantasy as a curriculum guideline is summed up best in his book *Insult to Intelligence*. In it he states, in a matter-of-fact manner, that "the distinctive feature theory could be wrong in any case."

With all the respectable scientific evidence available about how the human brain is capable of reading an alphabetic script, one would think that Smith’s ideas might only be naively soaked up at cocktail parties. But instead, the Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia Ministries of Education have used Smith’s books as direct references in the development of their curriculum guidelines for teaching reading.

So our educators are not listening. At least the ones in charge aren’t. What do we do? There is hope. We are living in a democracy. One day they will be replaced.

Whole Language theories for beginning reading are untenable in the face of exacting research; they are untenable to the common sense of a lay person. Between research and common sense is the mythological domain of whole language. What is needed to solve our literacy problems is known. Only the obduracy of our educational authorities lies in the way.

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**LETTERS**

**A Phonics Teacher Confesses**

Letters To The Editor
Alberta Report, June 21, 1993

Re: “psychologists spell it out for teachers.”

I resigned from teaching three years ago, disgusted with the inept methodology foisted upon teachers from “above.” Thank heavens for the Canadian Psychologists Association’s recommendations regarding phonics. I taught phonics to my grade 1 French immersion students for seven years (with some “whole language”). During the last few years it was almost a secret, only taught when the door was closed, flash cards removed quickly from sight, no “evidence” left out in the open. But phonics works. The parents were supportive and fortunately one principal turned a blind eye.

The public does not realize that there are many wonderful teachers who would love to teach phonics but are prevented from doing so by principals, inspectors, school board policy and curriculum. It is time for the policy-makers to face the fact that phonics has taught generations to read far better than the students of today using only “whole language.” As well it is up to parents to lobby for the return of phonics in our schools.

Christine Sazie-Stewart,
Springbank, Alberta

I received your recommendations for Literacy and General Education Improvements today (July 26th). I can’t delay telling you what an important document I believe this to be. You have achieved a well-balanced, accurate and potent presentation of the facts about the widespread failure to teach children to read.

I like the very accurate description of the price being paid now and that will be paid in the future by all elements
of society as a result of pedagogically induced illiteracy.
Congratulations on the very important work you have
done and continue to do.

Carl L. Kline, M.D., F.R.C.P. (C)
Vancouver, B.C.

I am happy to see your article about reading problems
that students are having because they are being taught the
whole language approach. I am sad that it is occurring in our
schools when it doesn’t have to.
I am an elementary school teacher who has tutored
many students who have had trouble grasping and under-
standing the “look-see” approach. My tutoring is based on
phonetics and have seen a definite improvement in their
reading skills over time.

Nora Van Thournout
Edmonton, AB

I am very interested in receiving a copy of RALI’s
Recommendations report. I’ve read the article Fighting For
Phonics in the Edmonton Journal and I feel encouraged by
it.
My son finished grade one this June and has developed
no reading skills. The whole language approach has been of
no value to him. Thanks to a friend who is a teacher and
believes in phonics we have been encouraged by her to start
back at the ABCs and use phonics. Our son is being tutored
every day for the summer.
I too believe the language program has its faults. In my
son’s class alone 8 out of 22 children are having difficulty
as well as 8 children from a combination of two, grade two
classes. I found these numbers, in my opinion, very high and
disturbing.

C. Scholtz
Stony Plain, AB

I value each issue of RALI, but the latest one (vol 5, #1)
has an excellent contribution by J. Redmond Curtis, Ph. D.
of Sydney, Nova Scotia.
I will quote, if I may, an observation that is almost
completely overlooked.
Schools will breed students who can process the present
but who will have no interest in or knowledge of anything
beyond their own ‘relevant’ present...Each student will have
developed to a saturational level his or her own concept of
self-esteem...transmitting culture which is a traditional prin-
ciple recognizes the students having to learn something
outside their own wants.
As a former high school teacher of history, I appreciate
this insight.
You do not publicize commercial material. If any of
your readers want to buy phonics teaching material to teach
children at home, a list is available through an OQE
member: Rudy Sumner, RR#4, Komoka, Ontario, NOL 1R0.

Mary Novak
Kitchener, ONT.

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