

An Open Letter to a Defender of Whole Language Reading Instruction

By Patrick Groff Professor of Education Emeritus San Diego State University

Dear Dr. Bruce R. Joyce: I am taking the liberty to assume that the provocative tone of your article, in the *Reading Teacher* (official organ of the International Reading Association) for April 1999, was designed to stimulate responses from its readers. Your comments, called "Reading About Reading: Notes from a Consumer to the Scholars of Literacy," a discussion of the history of the debate over the best way to teach children to read, do cry out for a rebuttal. There are many justified critical comments, pointed questions, and legitimate reservations about what appears to be your thinly-disguised defense of the experimentally discredited Whole Language (WL) approach to reading instruction

First, I was disappointed by your depiction of the current so-called "reading wars," and particularly that you hold that they are not necessary since they supposedly represent a "politicization of policy about reading." This dispute in truth grew to its present intensity after it was discovered that none of the unique principles and practices of the popular WL approach to children's reading development is corroborated by experimental findings. That is to say, the overwhelming preponderance of relevant empirical findings disconfirm the novel doctrines and procedures of WL. I find nothing of a political nature about that information

Your contention to the contrary, notwithstanding, the present reading teaching controversy is pertinent because it forces educators and teacher educators to make a forced-choice between WL instruction, and the kind of reading teaching that experimental research finds is the most effective. Findings from the qualitative (anecdotal, nonnumerical, subjective, unscientific) research that WL advocates produce (which by its nature cannot be replicated), and the results of experimental research, are consistently found to be irreconcilable. There thus is no logical means by which information from the two sources can be melded, merged, or combined to produce a supposed superior form of "balanced" reading instruction, as you claim is possible. It is irrational to argue otherwise

In saying this, I realize that educators fervently believe in eclecticism in reading instruction. I agree with them here, to the extent that when there is agreement from both qualitative and experimental research findings as to what produces the most reading ability for students in the shortest time possible, that these commonly discovered findings should be honored. Unfortunately, this concurrence happens only rarely between qualitative and experimental research on student's beginning reading

Therefore, your plea for an end to the reading wars, i.e., for each side in it to abandon its carefully considered position as to how children best learn to read, so as to fashion an expedient, yet illogical compromise ("balance" between them) that violates the fundamental convictions about reading instruction that each side holds, must not be heeded. Educators in the past have been roundly criticized for their intellectually

inconsistent views on reading instruction. Your "balanced" reading instruction proposal perpetuates that unfortunately unprincipled manner of decision-making, it is obvious

Then, your attempt to make balanced reading instruction tolerable, is hindered by some startling departures from well-known facts that you make in this respect. For example: o The co-founder of WL, Frank Smith, does not believe that the "quality of life, employability, or the national ability to cope" depends on student' attainment of competent reading ability. Quite to the contrary, he is on record as severely downplaying the positive role of reading in these regards

Your comment that WL movement leaders Dorothy Strickland and Constance Weaver want to "calm the waters" of the reading dispute, and that WL co-founder Kenneth Goodman is a prime example of a "quiet, reasoned voice" in this regard, is easily refuted. For example, I debated Weaver in print over the reading instruction issue. In this meeting of minds, she was given to attack on the personal attributes of her opponents rather than to the issues they raise, to impugning their motives, and to a large amount of name-calling. Goodman and Strickland respond irresponsibly in like fashion to negative critics of WL

You wrongly contend that there is ample experimental evidence to prove Goodman's WL view of reading instruction is authentic. In fact, only a tiny proportion of the empirical literature on reading teaching supports his WL theory of how beginning reading instruction is most effectively conducted. Your repetition of his charge, that direct, intensive, systematic, early, and comprehensive (DISEC) teaching of phonics information has been a "monumental failure," thus will not make it come true

You inaccurately maintain that the "practice of teaching reading was little changed by the [1987] California-style whole language framework." From 1987 onward, I visited about 150 elementary school classrooms on a regular basis (as part of my duty as a supervisor of university student teachers). Never had I previously witnessed a more radical change in reading instruction than took place at this time. In actuality, this state mandate for WL caused revolutionary changes in reading teaching (that sharply reduced beginning reader' opportunity to learn to read, it turned out). Reading instruction guidelines imposed by California school districts after 1987 that disparaged DISEC teaching make that point clear

You often indulge in ad hominem invective against those with whom you disagree. For example you negatively criticize Bill Honig's recent writings on reading instruction, but make no reference to which of them you judge to be "hyperbolic." You make the same charge against information distributed by the National Right to Read Foundation, again without providing any references. You call the recent National Institute of Child Health and Human Development-sponsored research on reading "shocking" -- as before, however, with no reference to specific studies. Defenses of direct and systematic phonics instruction are "quasi-ecclesiastical," you proclaim, with no evidence offered in this regard. You continually cast "systematic phonics" instruction in an evil light, in obvious contrast to experimental findings of its relative effectiveness. Those who defend DISEC

teaching of phonics are said to be "enemies of literacy," are "naive and politically correct," and/or are "media-oriented, politically-minded extremists." And so on

It is true, as you write, that at school entry age, children speak "several thousand words." However, this does not mean, as you insist, that they need "no direct instruction in the [speech] sounds of language." Children learn to speak normally with no conscious awareness of the speech sounds (they have no phonemic awareness) in the words that they utter. The relevant evidence consistently refutes your notion that 5-year-olds are phonemically aware

Your contention that DISEC teaching of reading is not "multidimensional," in that it is unconcerned with developing student' powers of critical thought, is unwarranted. In fact, this kind of instruction prepares students better for critical reading and thinking than does the WL approach. In the latter, students are not required to identify the precise words and meanings that authors intended to convey. However, unless students precisely understand the literal vocabulary and larger meanings of written material, they have no adequate basis on which to critically examine its validity

I hope I can convince you that educators need to be provided impartial, unambiguous, and comprehensive reviews of experimental, as versus qualitative research findings on how students best learn to read. Educators should be reminded that they must make a forced-choice between these findings. They thus must not be misled into believing that these two sources of information usually compliment each other, and that anyone who says otherwise is biased, ignorant, or self-deluded. I fear that your one-sided article creates this "fog of dissension," rather than dispels it, as you say you intended to do