On Teaching Reading, Spelling, and Related Subjects
Minority children from low-income families typically get the same kind of skill-and-drill instruction that low-achieving students are subjected to. Meanwhile, students in Whole Language (WL) classrooms are often given books of their own choosing in class, the higher their scores. (Those who could do so every day had the best scores, those who read every other day had the lowest, and those who used them occasionally again fell in between. Finally, those who never took quizzes or tests did the worst.)

The researcher who directed the latter study also discovered another sort of difference between children who came from poor parts of the city versus the suburbs. A Whole Language teacher proceeds from the assumption that there are a number of ways to help beginning readers make sense of what they are reading. To write well, they have to read well – and vice versa – so reading, too, is taken seriously in such classrooms. Some of the basic questions are: Have you read this before? Does this sound right? What do you mean? What’s going on? And they invite students afterwards to discuss what they’ve read, to admire it and to make it better, because that’s the whole point.

In traditional classrooms, by contrast, kids face the prospect of completing worksheets filled with a bunch of unrelated silent-words. They may be given contrived sentences to read, each sound of which they are expected to pronounce perfectly. For example, a child in a 3rd-grade reading class in Upstate New York is being asked to: write down the number of Bs in the word "butterfly." He gets through the first six words and then pauses before blurting out, "Trees." A skills-oriented teacher would likely say, "No. Look at the letters again. What comes after the th?" But, no. "Trees." Before the child finishes his sentence, a skills-oriented teacher would say, "No. No. No. You didn’t even look at the letters. Trees." From there, he gets even farther and farther into the sentence, but no help. The child is just trying to do by the rules of phonics the best he can. As a result, he feels even worse about himself.

There is a gap, in other words, between the arguments and the data. There's a tendency to assume that Whole Language explains why children are having trouble reading in some cases, but not in others. As a result, some proponents of Whole Language have appeared to be pretty desperate to claim with a straight face that Whole Language explains why children are having trouble reading in some cases, but not in others. A Whole Language teacher proceeds from the assumption that there are a number of ways to help beginning readers make sense of what they are reading. To write well, they have to read well – and vice versa – so reading, too, is taken seriously in such classrooms. Some of the basic questions are: Have you read this before? Does this sound right? What do you mean? What’s going on? And they invite students afterwards to discuss what they’ve read, to admire it and to make it better, because that’s the whole point.

The emphasis on social interaction among beginning readers is a key ingredient of a Whole Language classroom.

Nor is there any basis for insisting that such direct instruction has to take the form of repetitive drilling of isolated phonemes. There are, to be sure, several reasons for exercising caution in drawing any conclusions about phonics. For example, it's not clear that phonics evidence is strong enough to support a wholesale switch to Whole Language classrooms from a traditional approach. To restate the important finding: kids who took frequent and extensive tests did better, when judged on content, than those who had been in a traditional classroom; there were no differences between the two in terms of mastery of mechanics.

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References

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