

On Teaching Reading, Spelling, and Related Subjects

Half Truths About Whole Language

By Alfie Kohn

“Kids aren’t learning how to read these days because ivory-tower ideologues have eliminated the teaching of necessary basic skills in favor of feel-good, PC fads like Whole Language. We’d do a lot better if we brought back good old-fashioned phonics!”

These days there’s no escaping pronouncements like that one. Such a position is understandably popular: it’s simple and straightforward, and its urgency commands attention. Not only is it tirelessly promoted by social and political conservatives, but most of the articles that appear in mainstream newspapers and magazines about teaching children to read tend to dismiss Whole Language as a fad and claim that “studies show” children need direct instruction in phonics. Meanwhile, supporters of Whole Language, even on those rare occasions when they manage to get their voices heard by the general public, haven’t always been very effective at making their case. [1]

Frankly, if all I knew about the issue was what I read in the popular press or heard from acquaintances, I too would probably wonder why some kooky new technique had displaced the tried-and-true method for teaching children to read. But once we begin to educate ourselves about the issue, things look very different. As a matter of fact, if we go back to that italicized statement at the top of the page and review it carefully, we find that it is utterly false in every particular. It isn’t true that “kids aren’t learning how to read these days.” [2] It isn’t true that progressive reading reforms have been imposed by – or even uniformly supported by – denizens of the “ivory tower.” [3] (Nor is it the case that those who favor such reforms are any more “ideological” than those who oppose them.) It isn’t true that there is less teaching of necessary basic skills these days, or even that traditional methods for teaching those skills are on the way out. [4]

The key claim that needs to be evaluated, of course, is whether “we’d do a lot better if we brought back good old-fashioned phonics.” Let’s begin by clarifying what we’re talking about here. “Phonics” refers to the relationship between symbols and sounds. A child with “phonemic awareness” is one who can “decode” a letter or pair of letters (such as th) and knows how to say it. By way of an overview of the discussion to come, we might tease apart three questions that usually get lumped together. First, do kids need to learn phonics? (Answer: yes.) Second, do kids need to be taught phonics explicitly in order to pick it up? (Answer: some do, but most probably don’t.) Third, if kids are taught phonics explicitly, does that have to be done with the usual “drill ‘n skill” techniques demanded by traditionalists? (Answer: hell, no.)

While there is no precise, universally accepted definition of Whole Language, and no party line for

its proponents, this much is clear: it isn't the "opposite" of phonics, and it doesn't deny the importance of phonics. Even Kenneth Goodman, a pioneer of the Whole Language movement whose views are sometimes considered extreme, agrees that "you cannot read an alphabetic language without using and learning phonics." [5] At some point, and by some means, kids have to acquire the ability to "break the code" and interpret all those phonemes.

The camp usually designated as "pro-phonics" believes in teaching sound/symbol relationships mostly, if not exclusively, through direct instruction, in a way that is intensive and explicit, by means of a very specific sequence of lessons. The point is to get children to correctly identify one phoneme after another until they can do so without thinking. In some classrooms, the reading materials are limited to contrived sentences containing only the patterns they've already been taught. (If your kindergartner or first grader's school reading matter is mostly of the "Pat has lots of bats" variety, you should be worried.) [6]

Proponents of Whole Language don't challenge the significance of phonics, just the assumption that traditional methods of phonics instruction are the only way to help kids learn to read. It's probably true that some kids - anywhere from 5 to 20 percent - can really benefit from some direct teaching of phonics skills. But there is absolutely no justification for subjecting all students to this approach, or for making it the centerpiece of classroom reading instruction for any students, or for continuing it after kids have learned to read. Nor is there any basis for insisting that such direct instruction has to take the form of repetitive drilling of isolated phonemes.

A Whole Language teacher proceeds from the assumption that there are a number of ways to help beginning readers make sense of what's on the page. They may follow the words while someone reads aloud to them. They may watch a teacher write down familiar words, or even pick up a pencil and try to do that themselves. Once they can recognize the first letter of the word, that, along with other clues from the context, can help them predict the rest. "Essentially," says Goodman, they "learn to read by reading." [7] As parents, we make use of such strategies all the time,[8] and with considerable success. Most of us, after all, choose books for our young kids "as literature and not as reading instruction materials." [9] Without thinking about phonemes or decoding, without requiring them to sound out each word correctly, we explain what's going on in the story, perhaps pointing out the accompanying pictures, so that the letters they see come to be associated with the sounds they hear.

What really distinguishes Whole Language teachers, though, is not just a broader array of strategies for helping children learn to decode text, but the belief that reading is more than decoding text. A child filled full of phonics rules may be able to pronounce a word flawlessly without having any idea what it means, much less what its relation is to the words sitting next to it. (Some critics refer to the process of getting kids to call out the words in front of them as "barking at the page.") Whole Language teachers insist that reading is first and foremost about meaning. Sure, kids have to learn a set of skills, but as a means to an end — the end being to make sense of stories and ideas. It's about communicating more than about consonants (or even words).[10] Therefore, the question to ask your child's teacher isn't "Are you going to teach phonics?" It's: "How are you going to teach phonics? As a series of isolated skills, or as part of reading and writing real stories?"

For kids who don't seem to be picking up a phonetic concept, such as the silent e at the end of words like line, some teachers will give a "mini-lesson" on that topic, in the context of a story chosen (or written) by students that happens to contain that word. First comes the story, then a brief detour to explain how this particular word is pronounced (perhaps followed by a little bit of discussion about similar words), and then back to the story.[11] The teacher's motto here is E. M. Forster's famous epigraph, "Only connect": symbols and sounds are taught in order to enjoy literature, and also in the process of enjoying literature.

In traditional classrooms, by contrast, kids face the prospect of completing worksheets filled with a bunch of unrelated silent-e words. They may be given contrived sentences to read, each sound of which they are expected to pronounce perfectly. (Here, the motto seems to be, "Only correct.") Thus, it shouldn't have been surprising when one traditional teacher was heard admonishing a child, "Put that book away and do your reading!"[12] - because "reading" there meant practicing skills.[13]

The worksheets that traditional teachers use are often included in giant "basal readers" that may be assigned to every young child throughout a school district. These typically include scripted lesson plans for the teacher so that, in effect, the entire reading curriculum comes in a package. Basals also include stories, or fragments of stories, which may have been selected more to teach a specific skill than on the basis of their literary quality. Even the better basals, attempting to capitalize on elements of the Whole Language movement by including more compelling readings, reflect a one-size-fits-all approach: Here is what everyone will read, as determined by someone outside the classroom.

A Whole Language teacher would rather spend her classroom budget on the kind of children's stories that can be found in bookstores and libraries. The underlying assumption isn't just that reading material doesn't need to contain controlled vocabulary, where new phonemes or skills are introduced on a specific schedule. Rather, it's that such texts ought to be actively avoided. Better to have a child read a well-written story about an interesting subject. Better, in fact, to have children practice reading other things that matter to them: a list of their classmates, or of today's activities, or of the ingredients in their favorite cereal — or perhaps their own ideas, as transcribed by the teacher. In sharp contrast to random sentences about things like Pat's bat collection, these are examples of language put to use in the real world. Kids don't have to be bribed with stickers, stars, or praise to figure out what those words mean; they want to know.

Of course, the risk of a story chosen for its theme, or some other use of language chosen for its relevance, is that a child may be temporarily stumped by a tricky word. In that case, the Whole Language teacher might invite him to speculate about what the word could be. Or she might say, "Skip that word; we'll come back to it later." And if he tries and makes a mistake? Suppose a child is slowly reading aloud from a story that includes the sentence I think my car needs new tires. 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 t?" But a Whole Language teacher is more likely to respond, "My car needs new trees??" Does that make sense to you?" Then, once he gets the word right, she'd probably call his attention to the way it's spelled.

In a Whole Language classroom, kids are helped to fall in love with the written word. They are encouraged to write even before they can spell, coming to see themselves at a precocious age as authors. They also come to see themselves as part of a community of readers and writers. Children spend a lot of time reading to, and with, each other, and the teacher helps them feel safe enough to persevere through the inevitable mistakes that occur while learning new skills. The emphasis on social interaction among beginning readers is a key ingredient of a Whole Language classroom.

Another distinguishing feature is the chance for children to choose what books they want to read, something that teachers have learned is a surefire way of maximizing motivation. In fact, giving students a lot more control over their learning is part of what makes Whole Language so effective and exciting - and, at the same time, so disconcerting for people accustomed to having the teacher make all the decisions.[14] "Whole Language is not just about giving up the basal," says one prominent reading teacher. "Rather, it is about having teachers and students decide together what is worth knowing and how to come to know it." [15]

This recalls a distinction we came across earlier in this book, between inviting kids to play an active role in constructing meaning, on the one hand, and treating them as passive receptacles to be filled up with skills, on the other. “The intensive systematic teaching of phonics that is so widely promoted reflects a transmission model of learning . . . a matter of absorbing meaning from the page,” while in Whole Language classrooms, reading is seen as a “transaction between the reader and the text.”[16] As parents, we ought to think about that fundamental difference, and then ask which model seems to describe more accurately what reading is all about. Which model seems more respectful of children? Which is more likely to help them become enthusiastic readers - or even skillful decoders?

The Consequences of How Kids Learn to Read

“Which model is more likely to help children become skillful decoders?” That last question is particularly provocative because it raises the possibility that Whole Language, besides being more consistent with a philosophical commitment to active learning, is also “the best phonics program there is,” in the words of Jerome Harste of Indiana University.[17] Why? Because it’s easier to decode a word when you already know what it means. By virtue of insisting that meaning should come before skills, Whole Language isn’t just more enjoyable but also more effective.

A meaning-first approach is particularly sensible when the language being learned is English. Our language is very hard to learn phonetically because so many letters have more than one possible sound. If you see a g followed by an e, for example, there are five possible pronunciations: hard g, long e (gear); hard g, short e (get); soft g, long e (gene); soft g, short e (gel); soft g, silent e (George).[18] You don’t know how the letters sound until you know the word of which they’re a part. Of course, you could try to memorize all the rules for pronouncing different letter combinations, but their usefulness is severely limited due to all the exceptions. Remember “When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking”? This guide isn’t even certain to achieve its effect for words like guide or certain or achieve. In his infamous pro-phonics tract of the 1950s, Rudolph Flesch declared, “Teach the child what each letter stands for and he can read” - to which one educator replied that someone relying solely on that method wouldn’t even be able to read the cover of Flesch’s book. [19]

To the unique difficulties of English, add the unique limits of young children. It’s hard for a five- or six-year-old to learn abstractly, and that’s precisely what’s entailed by a phonics-based approach: skills are removed from a meaningful context and learned as abstract rules. To a behavioral theorist it may seem logical in principle to start with the pieces and then put them together, moving from phonemes to words to sentences to stories. In the real world, though, it’s far more natural and effective for the whole to come before the part. As one first grader, struggling with a skills-based lesson, exclaimed in frustration, “You know, I could read this if I knew what it was about!”[20]

This is especially true for children who have difficulty learning or who haven’t been exposed to much print before starting school. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that these kids need a steady diet of disconnected skills, they’re actually the best candidates for learning in context. Or, to put it the other way around, they’re the ones least likely to succeed when meaning takes a back seat to decoding. But it isn’t easy to convince phonics fans of this: Whenever their approach fails, they regard that as evidence that these children “need still more systematic instructional discipline.” And when more of the same doesn’t help, the children may finally be diagnosed as having some kind of learning disability. After all, they “failed to learn to read on the basis of [direct] phonics instruction.” What more proof do you need?[21]

Regie Routman, a leader in the Whole Language movement, has no patience for people who invoke the “good old days” when no one questioned a skills-based approach. She remembers teaching that

way,

using scope-and-sequence charts, phonics drills and worksheets, linguistic readers with contrived stories, red pencils to correct all the worksheets, assigned and copied-from-the-board writing. And lots of kids were failing to learn to read successfully. In the school where I was teaching, almost 50 percent of our students needed extra support in reading by second grade. . . . [For many of those kids] who couldn't hear sounds in words or 'get' phonics . . . there was nothing wrong with their ability to learn; the problem was how we were teaching them.[22]

The story was much the same in the early twentieth century: Children were failing "to read at grade level, despite drill in phonics." [23] Later, we'll look at studies that investigate more directly which approach succeeds better at helping children learn to read, but in the meantime we shouldn't forget the related question of which approach is more likely to foster a love of reading. Too heavy or too premature an emphasis on decoding leaves children with the impression that "the aim of reading is to be able to identify the words appearing in the text." [24] No wonder teachers who have shifted away from this approach and toward Whole Language often report that Reading goes from being kids' least favorite subject to their most favorite. [25]

Even more striking, perhaps, are the results of moving in the opposite direction. That's what happened to a little girl named Patty, who "considered herself a reader and writer" while in a Whole Language kindergarten. She wrote long, imaginative stories, one of which had this playful ending (with spelling corrected): "If you want to know more about Jane's adventures, read the next chapter in my book."

Then Patty started first grade. Her new teacher used a traditional skills-based method of teaching, where the children were drilled in capitalization and had to spend their time writing letters over and over. "Instead of writing stories and poems and reading self-selected books, Patty read short, controlled-vocabulary stories in basals and worked on endless workbook pages." Within a month she had stopped writing stories, even at home. More to the point, she stopped seeing herself as someone who could write stories. She said she didn't know how to spell correctly and didn't know what to write about. Finally, when her parents persisted, she sat down tearfully and wrote: "The cat The cat is a pet." - and then crossed it all out. [26]

I thought of Patty not long ago when I got a call from my friend Bill, a lawyer in the Midwest. He was uncharacteristically agitated as he described his son's experience, also in a traditional first-grade classroom. An after-school science program emphasizing hands-on learning was working out wonderfully, Bill said, and the chapter books he was reading with his son in the evening were also a big hit. But the repetitive phonics lessons during school were taking their toll. Bill was now coming to see classroom discipline in a new way. "If I had to do this stuff, I wonder how I'd act in class," he mused. Most of all, he worried about what intensive phonics training was doing to his son's attitude about reading. "His enthusiasm for learning is a precious resource and I'm scared he's losing it," Bill said quietly. "At the end of the year, those kids will know how to 'decode.' But so what, if they don't want to pick up a book."

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Sometimes the response to such a discussion about teaching children to read is that what we need is a "balanced" approach, a compromise that includes the best of both worlds. Most teachers like the sound of that; it's mild and diplomatic and seems an especially appealing way to deal with an especially politicized topic. Many people reacted with relief, for example, when a 1998 report on reading instruction, sponsored by the National Research Council and commissioned by the federal government, attempted to "neutralize the phonics vs. whole language debate" by finding common

ground.[27]

The first problem with this solution is that, practically speaking, it doesn't seem to make much of a difference. Lots of people claim to support a middle-of-the-road approach but still come down clearly on one side or the other. One of the most extreme examples of rigidly traditional phonics-based instruction in the country, a program mandated for use in all primary classrooms in Houston's public schools, has children "work[ing] their way through the alphabet . . . in the singsong tones of a military cadence." Nevertheless, it is officially described as a "Balanced Approach to Reading." [28] The moderate rhetoric may simply be used as a public relations strategy.

But here's a more basic question: Do we even want something in the middle? In my experience, most of those reassuring declarations that the truth lies somewhere in between the two models are based on a misunderstanding of what Whole Language is about. Specifically, they proceed from the erroneous belief that it excludes phonics.[29] The truth is that Whole Language itself represents a balanced approach: It's committed to helping children acquire decoding skills, but in a context and for a purpose.

There is indeed a real choice to be made, but it's not between Whole Language and phonics. Rather, it's between using direct instruction when it's appropriate and using it as the default method of teaching. The choice is whether we put meaning or skills at the center of the curriculum, whether children are active learners and choosers or passive receptacles who are expected to read what they're told. These are choices that can't be finessed by saying, "Let's have some of both."

In practice, a "balanced" approach to reading instruction often turns out to mean that kids get to read some real literature, but separate from, and sometimes only after, the worksheet-based skills units. People who say we should "use whatever works"[30] often evade the question "Works for what?" They don't think about the fundamental incompatibility of different goals, different methods, different views of learning and of children. It's easy to say "split the difference"; it's harder to see the difference for what it is, and take a stand.

Sit Down for a Spell

Imagine that you're visiting some friends, chatting in the living room, when their adorable 16-month-old waddles up and says, "Me want 'nana." Your friend glares at the toddler and says sternly, "No! You're not getting a banana or anything else until you learn to speak properly!" — and then turns to you with a disgusted shake of the head, commenting, "We're raising a generation of illiterates these days! Well, that 'anything goes' philosophy doesn't fly in our house. We demand rigor and precision in communication."

I don't think I've ever met anyone who would actually react like this — and if I have, I don't want to know about it. But this response is only a slight exaggeration of how traditionalists respond when children in the primary grades are encouraged to write before they can spell correctly. "Invented spelling," closely related to Whole Language, is based, first of all, on the discovery that children go through fairly predictable stages in the way they write words. Their early attempts at spelling (like their early attempts at speaking) aren't random or sloppy, but reasonable approximations that suggest a certain level of skill development. In fact, some people in the field prefer the term "developmental spelling" — if only to emphasize that children in such classrooms aren't being taught to spell incorrectly and that accurate spelling will eventually be expected.

Second, invented spelling is based on the finding that young children who write more tend to read better.[31] Not surprisingly, as we saw with Patty, kids are inclined to write more, to take risks, when they don't have to worry quite yet about spelling words perfectly[32] — which, at that age, is

unrealistic in any case. The question is what we're willing to have them sacrifice for technical accuracy: Would we rather have kindergartners write about a froshus dobrmn pensr or about a bad dog?[33] (Of course, for very young children, the choice may be even more stark; either we let them use invented spelling or we don't let them write at all.)

It's "interesting that the people who rail against invented spelling are the very same people who want more phonics," notes Routman. "The irony is that invented spelling relies on phonics" and, perhaps, should even be called "phonics-based spelling" to drive home the point.[34] As we'll see, kids who are encouraged to listen to the way a word sounds and spell it as best they can usually acquire good spelling skills eventually, in addition to being more fluent readers and writers. Teachers who allow invented spelling aren't saying that it's always going to be OK to spell words however you feel; they're saying that in the early grades, the costs of demanding perfection are too high.

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The basic choice reflected in the difference between invented spelling and its absence, or between Whole Language and a traditional skills-based approach, doesn't disappear once kids have learned the rudiments of reading. Phonics, to put this whole discussion in perspective, is only an issue until first or second grade.[35] But teachers of reading or language arts with older children continue to face the same set of questions: trade books or basal readers? choices by students or control of students? cooperation or separation? Of course, the skills are now more advanced than pronunciation: They include things like grammar and vocabulary and, yes, spelling. But the fundamental issue is exactly the same: Are these things to be learned because the teacher requires it, or because they help you communicate more effectively to readers when you write, and get more out of what you read?

Pick the stuffiest, dreariest, silliest, most out-of-context and inauthentic set of practices in each domain, and that's exactly what you'll find traditionalists fighting fiercely to preserve: spelling and vocabulary quizzes based on lists of unrelated words, lessons on the separate elements of punctuation and grammar, diagrammed sentences, penmanship practice, formulaic book reports that could make anyone lose interest in even the most delightful story. Frankly, I used to do many of these things when I was teaching, offering the kind of lessons I now refer to as "Our Friend the Semicolon." My only excuse was that I didn't know any better; I suffered through it as a student, so I assumed it was what I had to do as a teacher. Then, when my students tuned out — or acted out — I simply held them responsible, announcing that they had to make "more of an effort" or "lose the attitude." What I didn't do was examine the curriculum and my own assumptions about learning.

Take spelling. In most Old School classrooms, it's a subject unto itself, sometimes with a separate textbook. Kids get lists of words to memorize, and regular quizzes to check their progress. (Of course, getting a word right on the test doesn't mean they'll get it right when they actually use it in their own writing, but then the transfer of facts and skills to real-world applications has never really been a strong point of traditional teaching.) The alternative, as should be clear by now, is not to ignore the issue. It's to have students learn how to spell as part of writing rather than as a separate skill, and for the purpose of communicating more effectively.

Thus, students might be encouraged to examine words that have more than one acceptable spelling (ketchup/catsup), or whose spelling has changed over time ([a]esthetic, catalog[ue]), to get a sense of how arbitrary is the determination of which version is correct. They might be invited to write a word as many different ways as possible and then to evaluate the different spellings, finally checking out which one is in the dictionary. Rather than having everyone in class working on the same list, each student might make a personal dictionary of words that she has trouble with, or that she uses

regularly but isn't sure of, or simply that she's curious about. These are the words for which each student will be responsible. (Indeed, this whole approach, unlike the basic skills model, is more about having students take responsibility for their own learning.)

Instead of just learning lists of words, students in a Whole Language class would probably consider the strategies that writers use for recognizing and correcting errors, thereby turning spelling into another opportunity to think rather than memorize blindly. Finally, the teacher would emphasize the difference between a rough draft, where spelling shouldn't be especially important, and a final draft, where it does matter. As Harvey Daniels puts it, "I don't care whether anybody can spell or not. I care whether they can edit. I care that they know how to find the help they need to turn their misspellings into correct spellings before they release their writing to the public." [36]

The same basic philosophy of learning is present when it comes time to teach vocabulary: It's integrated into the process of becoming more competent at reading and writing, not presented as a list of definitions to commit to memory. Students might keep their own lists of words whose meanings they want to know and remember, and they might begin in each case by taking an educated guess at what a word means (based on the sentence in which it appears or a part of the word that's familiar) before looking it up.

Likewise for grammar and punctuation: Our kids need to be rescued from exercises that consist of adding commas, or capitalizing words, or changing adjectives to adverbs in an endless list of pointless, unrelated sentences. The teacher's job is to help kids become thoughtful observers of what they're reading - appreciating the good and criticizing the awkward - as well as skillful revisers of their own writing. They ought to edit their classmates' stories, too, perhaps after discussing as a class what students of their age can reasonably be expected to do without the teacher's help. Similarly, penmanship has better and worse purposes (writing neatly so others can understand your ideas versus conforming to someone's model of the "right way" to form a k) as well as better and worse methods (practicing on text that has meaning to the student versus turning out rows of letters).

In the best classrooms, no one forgets that the point of mastering grammar and punctuation, spelling and syntax, is to be a better writer. It is the capacity to put ideas into words, to inform or move or entertain a reader, that is most important to a Whole Language teacher. Children are encouraged to write constantly. They write notes to each other (and may have mailboxes in their classroom for exchanging them) and letters to people outside the school. They write books that, at least in some schools, are actually catalogued and shelved in the library. They read their stories at Author Teas for groups of parents. They watch as their teachers show them how a writer writes - crossed-out mistakes, false starts, and all. They turn the plays they read into poems, or the poems into stories. They write new endings to a favorite book, trying to imitate the author's voice.

To write well, they have to read well - and vice versa - so reading, too, is taken seriously in such classrooms. Some schools set aside time each day when everyone is supposed to Drop Everything And Read (DEAR). [37] Teachers read aloud to students, even those who are old enough to read to themselves. They stop periodically, asking everyone to predict what's going to happen next. And they invite students afterwards to discuss what they've read, to admire it and challenge it, to analyze both the style and the ideas, [38] and to get a kick out of the whole process. Routman advises teachers to ask their students the kind of questions about a book that they might put to a friend. [39]

All of this provides a welcome alternative to those awful book reports and comprehension questions: "What is the main idea of this story?" Reflective teachers would never dream of requiring their students to keep track of how much time they spent reading, or how many pages they read - the sort of assignment that can instantly transform reading into a chore. (Instead of being pulled into

the narrative, students invariably think about how much longer they've got to do this.) Such teachers avoid emphasizing grades, test scores, or competition, all of which can lead students to value reading less.[40] They steer clear of reading incentives, particularly in the form of corporate programs like "Book It!", which attempts to train kids to open books by dangling pizzas in front of them. (Worse still is something called "Accelerated Reader." Not only does it get kids to think that the objective of reading is to earn points and prizes, and not only does it limit the number of books that will "count," but it makes students answer superficial, fact-based questions about each text to prove they've read it, thereby changing [for the worse] not only why they read but also how they read.) The best teachers stave off these and other dangerous remnants of behaviorist orthodoxy that buy short-term reading behavior at the cost of producing "'least effort' literacy styles"[41] and possibly extinguishing interest in the reading itself.[42] But mostly they work to create long-term love of reading and critical thinking.

One last point, speaking of critical thinking: The nontraditional approach to reading and writing discussed here is notable for how much more it asks of students than does the skills-based model. In the words of a fourth-grade teacher with more than 30 years of experience, a woman who spent the first half of her career doing "traditional skills-and-drill" before moving to something closer to Whole Language, "I can honestly say I have much higher expectations for my students now. I am asking them to think, not to parrot answers I've already given them." [43]

[from Appendix A: The Hard Evidence]

Whole Language: Rethinking the Case Against

There aren't many topics in education where you will find so wide a chasm between what the evidence actually says and what the public assumes it says. It is widely believed that Whole Language (WL) has nothing to support it except good intentions, and that scientific evidence shows that systematic phonics instruction (and, more generally, a skills-based approach) is strongly preferable, if not absolutely necessary, for teaching children to read. This belief has been stated as fact so often by proponents of that kind of instruction that by now journalists, politicians, and many parents feel no need to defend it. It has become part of our folk wisdom.

The truth, as three Illinois educators explained, is that "the main body of educational research, amassed over six decades, strongly and consistently validates [those] progressive approaches to teaching reading now grouped under the name 'Whole Language.'" [44] We'll get to some of that proof shortly, but first let's take a closer look at the claims made to the contrary. To begin with, the studies brandished by WL opponents usually fail to support the claims for which they are being cited. There's a gap, in other words, between the arguments and the data. Exhibit A is the tendency to cite research showing that phonics is important. The proper response to this claim is, "Yeah. So?" The relevant question, remember, is not whether phonics matters, but how it will be taught. You can't take a study showing that kids have to recognize and know how to pronounce all the phonemes and then pretend you've justified a particular method of teaching that skill (such as the use of drills), or a particular schedule for this instruction (such as teaching phonics before letting kids read literature). As a matter of fact, "hardly any researcher advocates [teaching] phonics first - not even most phonics advocates." [45]

A second problem: The overwhelming majority of the research used to support direct instruction of phonics skills (and to oppose Whole Language) consists of tallying up children's scores on standardized reading tests. The problem is that most of those tests measure decoding and word identification, not comprehension.[46] Skills tests are a perfect match for skills instruction, and it's

not surprising that the latter often produces good results on the former. Sometimes those tests are literally nonsense: they require kids to sound out collections of letters that don't make any sense. They tell us nothing about what kids can do with skills. Because they don't measure literacy at all, they fail to capture what WL is capable of achieving.

Conversely, explicit training in phonemic awareness is most likely to produce an effect on this kind of test and least likely to produce an effect on those involving comprehension.[47] This is clearest in the case of extreme methods like Direct Instruction, where kids can be trained to call out letters or words on command but without any understanding. If their test scores go up, that says more about what's included in (and excluded from) these tests than it does about the value of this style of instruction.[48]

Third, studies do show that "phonemic awareness" is associated with being a good reader. The problem is that causality is assumed where only correlation has been shown. In other words, the fact that these two things tend to occur together shouldn't be (but often is) used to justify the claim that phonemic awareness causes, and is necessary for, reading well. It's entirely possible - and consistent with this line of research - that the relationship also works the other way around, or that some third factor, such as spending a lot of time with books, leads kids to be better readers and better decoders. This is not nit-picking: It might not make sense to focus on isolated phonics skills if it turned out that this wasn't the cause (or at least the only cause) of higher reading achievement.[49]

What's interesting about all the claims that research proves the superiority of intensive phonics instruction to WL is that a lot of the studies described in research reviews were conducted before WL, as such, even existed. What they were really comparing with a systematic focus on phonics was a "whole word" approach to decoding, which is completely different.[50] The fact that the latter didn't work very well doesn't count as an argument against Whole Language any more than it counts as an argument against something else with the word whole in it (such as "whole-class" instruction). Even some newer studies that claim to evaluate Whole Language are actually looking at something a little different, such as a "language experience" model of instruction, which may exclude such elements of WL as having children do their own writing.

In any case, the timing of the research cited in review articles is relevant since more recent studies have been especially supportive of WL. Also relevant is the population of children being studied. Some experiments, notably those sponsored by the National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD), have been limited to students "identified as experiencing some severe reading difficulties" — and yet are casually cited as though they justified using a certain method for teaching all children to read.[51]

In an effort to discredit WL, some opponents have lately made a different kind of argument. Look at California, they say: The state switched from phonics instruction to WL and then reading test scores, notably on the 1994 NAEP exam, dropped. This claim, too, has been repeatedly endlessly and uncritically in the popular press, reflecting at best an ignorance of what was really going on in that state and, at worst, a calculated attempt to discredit WL by twisting the facts. First of all, while a change in California's framework for language arts instruction in the late 1980s did call for the use of more literature in teaching reading, it wasn't a legal mandate and it never endorsed "Whole Language" per se. More important, there is no evidence that it was widely implemented. It's likely that more teachers began to use literature-based basal readers, but not necessarily in a manner consistent with WL (at which few had been trained). Many teachers simply assigned the same story to the whole class; when that didn't work very well, the fault was said to lie with WL.[52]

Of course, we're taking for granted that there was a surge in reading difficulties during the period in

question, a claim that is open to debate.[53] But even if this did occur, any reasonable observer would have to conclude that there are other, far more plausible explanations. Serious budget cutbacks resulted in large numbers of students in each class and one of the most inadequate school library systems in the country. In the early 1990s, California ranked dead last among the fifty states in librarians per pupil, and next to last in books per pupil.[54] Then there is the explosive growth in the number of students from other cultures: In 1988, 652,000 California students were designated as having limited English proficiency; a decade later, the number had more than doubled, to 1.4 million.[55] One would have to be pretty desperate to claim with a straight face that Whole Language explains why children are having trouble reading in California.

Whole Language: Reviewing the Case in Favor

Complementing the deficiencies of arguments against WL is the existence of quite a lot of data to support it. As someone who doesn't subscribe to professional journals on reading research, I was frankly unprepared for the sheer number of studies demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach. Some of them evaluated relatively few students, and not all of them mean the same thing by "Whole Language" or by the traditional alternative to which it is being compared. Still, the cumulative effect of this research literature is truly impressive, particularly in demonstrating that WL kids hold their own even on standardized reading tests. It seems that spending time reading and talking about real books, writing and rewriting, and generally being steeped in language-rich activities not only gives children an enormous advantage in terms of real literacy but also provides sufficient preparation for the low-level measures of skills that many people seem to care more about.

The 1980s saw a sprinkling of such studies, not all of which made it into journals. At a girls' parochial school in the Northeast, a WL kindergarten produced better results across the board, including on formal measures of phonetic knowledge, than did a kindergarten with a highly structured phonics program.[56] At a public school in the South, low-income minority kindergartners were followed and tested for three years. The result was similar: Those in the WL group not only became better readers but, despite the fact that they were "not drilled on words or word parts in isolation, they scored significantly higher" on two standardized measures of basic word skills than those who had been taught the traditional way.[57] A huge study in Utah, featuring 1,149 children in fifty classrooms, confirmed that "the use of children's literature to teach children to read had a positive effect upon students' achievement and attitudes toward reading - much greater than the traditional methods." [58]

In 1989, an article in *The Reading Teacher* caught the attention of people in the field by describing a number of studies that favored a literature-based approach to teaching reading.[59] It had no sooner been published than more such studies started appearing. Two showed up in the same issue of the *Journal of Educational Research*: One found that after a year of WL instruction, first graders did better on reading tests than their counterparts who had spent the year with skill lessons and worksheets.[60] The other found that WL helped second graders to write 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.[61]

Meanwhile, Lesley Mandel Morrow and her colleagues at Rutgers University were evaluating "at-risk kindergarten classes in an urban school district in New Jersey," comparing a group that did mostly story reading with a group that spent the year with a commercially produced reading-readiness program (*Living with the Alphabet*). The former group ended up being better readers in terms of comprehension while scoring about the same on a skills test.[62] Two years later, Morrow moved up to second grade, trying out a curriculum that spent less time on the district's standard basal reader and more time with independent reading and writing. Again, those children did better on a variety of measures of comprehension and just about as well on standardized tests.[63]

Even with the odds stacked against WL – teachers just learning how to teach this way and tests favoring traditional skills instruction – still other researchers have found it to be every bit as effective for helping first graders learn the mechanics of reading,[64] and for helping kindergartners (both high and low achievers) to become competent writers.[65] The researcher who directed the latter study also discovered another sort of difference between children who came from literature- as opposed to skills-based classrooms: When presented with incomprehensible text (for example, “To bus was it Mrs. the go the”), many of the skills kids said they couldn’t read it because it was too hard, whereas most of the literature kids just laughed.[66]

Additional studies seem to roll in every year. One reviewer concluded in 1998, “The notion that an emphasis primarily on skills and phonics instruction produces superior results to programs centered on providing children with a lot of interesting and comprehensible texts is not supported by the available evidence.”[67] And from another reviewer: “The evidence seems fairly strong that whole language teaching produces about the same results on standardized tests . . . as does traditional skills-oriented instruction, including teaching that has emphasized phonics. . . . [while producing] substantially greater advances in a variety of literacy-related skills, strategies, behaviors, and attitudes.[68]

Naturally, all of this flies in the face of the conventional wisdom, which is that an intensive skills-based approach makes up in effectiveness what it lacks in appeal. Nor does the research support the fall-back position of WL opponents – that progressive classrooms may work for high-achieving, affluent, white kids, but everyone else needs a heavy dose of basic skills. Until I combed through the journals, I didn’t understand how thoroughly this claim misrepresents what researchers have actually found.

Consider the children who seem to have a tougher time in school. In the overwhelming majority of American classrooms, these kids will receive a heavy diet of isolated skills and a heck of a lot less literature than their more proficient peers. “Good readers are more likely to be presented lessons that emphasize meaning, while poor readers’ lessons more often emphasize words, sounds, and letters.”[69] This continues to be the case despite research showing that poor readers need to spend time reading real books (as opposed to practicing skills) as much as good readers do – and maybe more.[70] Specifically, researchers have discovered that “low progressing” first graders (in one study) and “low scoring” kindergartners (in another) made more progress in WL classrooms than in traditional, skills-based classrooms. More proficient children did as well or better with WL, too.[71]

Minority children from low-income families typically get the same kind of skill-and-drill instruction that low-achieving students do, sometimes because individual teachers arrange things that way and sometimes because it’s imposed on teachers in the form of heavily scripted programs like Success for All[72] or Direct Instruction. (One group of researchers, looking to compare minority students who were in such classrooms to those in WL classrooms had trouble finding enough examples of the latter to conduct their study.)[73] To the extent that this represents a deliberate strategy – as opposed to another example of how the least thoughtful, lowest quality of teaching is once again most common in the poorest neighborhoods – the rationale goes like this: Privileged white children have often learned phonics from their parents before they get to school. Their peers who haven’t had this luxury need to learn phonics in order to catch up.[74]

One problem with this argument is the tendency, once again, to confuse learning phonics with a particular (intensive, systematic, drill-based) method of teaching phonics. Remember: WL includes phonics, but in the context of meaningful stories and other authentic uses of language. The children who show up at kindergarten already reading are typically coming from homes that are more like WL than drill-’n-skill environments. That’s why WL proponents point out that “overemphasizing

phonics may be especially damaging for children who have had few experiences with books prior to school.”[75]

This argument is supported by some of the studies already mentioned here, notably Morrow’s evaluation of at-risk children in New Jersey and the comparison of minority kindergartners in the South. Now we can add three separate studies of kindergartens and/or first grades, all published in the 1990s and all focusing on children of low socioeconomic status. All found that some variation of Whole Language instruction (in one case with a scant 15 minutes a day of skills instruction tacked on) was superior to traditional reading instruction for these students.[76]

Beyond the studies comparing individual classrooms, there is one other kind of evidence worth mentioning. The NAEP – the source of the allegedly lower scores of California students, which are used to argue against WL – includes a questionnaire that provides some information about students and teachers that can be correlated with the scores. Data from fourth-grade teachers in 1992 and 1994 turned up some intriguing findings. First, the more frequently students could read books of their own choosing in class, the higher their scores. (Those who could do so every day had the best scores, those who were never permitted to do so had the worst, and those who could do so occasionally were in the middle.) Second, those students who never used workbooks or worksheets had the highest scores, those who used them every day had the lowest, and those who used them occasionally again fell in between. Finally, those who never took quizzes or tests had the highest scores, those who took them every day had the lowest, and those who took them occasionally were in the middle.[77]

Although this evidence is indirect, it’s hard to deny that a class with more tests, more worksheets, and less choice does bear a striking resemblance to the Old School model of teaching, while the reverse has an awful lot in common with WL. More direct evidence comes from simply asking teachers whether they had a “whole language,” “literature-based,” or “phonics” approach to reading instruction. There are, to be sure, several reasons for exercising caution in drawing conclusions from the answers: WL and phonics are not opposites; what teachers say in a questionnaire isn’t necessarily what they do; and these are fourth-grade rather than primary-grade teachers. Still, the students of those teachers who picked “phonics” had a lower average score (208) than those who picked WL (220) or literature (221). Moreover, when you look at the state-by-state results, the more fourth grade teachers who said they used phonics, the lower that state’s average NAEP score.[78] If we assume there is some correlation between the way a school’s fourth grade teachers and its first grade teachers approach reading instruction, these results are suggestive indeed. Oddly, they weren’t reported in any newspapers or popular magazines.

*

Some academics who are partial to traditional instruction have claimed that standardized tests reveal no clear advantage for WL. (Notice the “spin” here: Proponents of WL might describe the same result by saying that Whole Language manages to do just as well as skills-centered instruction even though it doesn’t concentrate on teaching skills explicitly.) Based on my own reading of the research, I would challenge this summary: As we’ve seen, WL often pulls ahead of explicit phonics instruction on decoding measures and almost always proves superior when children are tested on comprehension.

But assume for the moment that the critics are right: WL is neither better nor worse than traditional instruction on achievement measures. Even if this is true, wouldn’t it still make sense to use WL in light of its other advantages? Giving students more choice about their learning has its own set of benefits and may even be regarded as intrinsically preferable. WL creates a sense of community, which is also valuable in its own right. And, perhaps most important, WL is much more likely to

foster a love of reading. It's only common sense that stories are more appealing than worksheets, and this view is supported not only by anecdotal accounts but by research. Regardless of race or class, kids in WL classrooms typically report having more positive attitudes about reading - and, in one study, actually did more reading on their own - than those in traditional classrooms.[79] For some of us, the ultimate objective is not just for children to know how to read, but for them to read. If Whole Language is more likely to lead to that result, it would seem to be the obvious choice, all else being even close to equal.

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Finally, two areas related to reading - spelling and grammar - have attracted a modest amount of research, with surprising results. Consider first the practice of "invented spelling," in which young children are encouraged to write before they can spell all the words correctly. Because they end up writing so much more than kids in traditional classrooms, they do indeed make a lot more mistakes. But they also spend more time rereading what they've written and they tend to pay attention to the relation between letters and sounds rather than just memorizing correct spellings. The result is that they "gradually adopt appropriate symbols for sounds and . . . progress to traditional spelling." [80] Typically, they wind up scoring "as well or better on standardized tests of spelling by the end of first grade than children who are allowed to use only correct spellings in first drafts." [81] One study found that first graders in invented spelling classrooms continued to make more errors in their writing through the year, but on a spelling test given in March, they actually got a higher score than those in traditional classrooms. Low achievers benefited the most from invented spelling. [82]

Grammar instruction provides a spectacular lesson in how old-fashioned dogma continues to drive beliefs and practices in direct contradiction to scientific findings. In the mid-1970s, a group of New Zealand researchers reviewed the available literature and wrote that "sixty years of empirical studies on the practical value of teaching grammar have failed to demonstrate any consistent measurable effects on students' writing skills." Nevertheless, they set out to design a careful test of their own, dividing 164 secondary school students into three carefully matched groups and exposing them to traditional grammar instruction, to a new "transformational grammar" curriculum, or to a course that just used the grammar time for more reading and creative writing. Three teachers rotated through each approach, so each group of students was exposed to all three teachers doing the same kind of instruction. At the end of three years, there were virtually no differences among the groups, which is to say there were no measurable benefits of formal grammar instruction. [83]

Returning to the question in 1991, two U. S. scholars contributed a definitive chapter to a research handbook published by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English. They found absolutely nothing to challenge the New Zealanders' conclusion. Indeed, a meta-analysis performed by one of the authors a few years earlier had discovered that students studying grammar actually did worse than their peers on some measures, raising the possibility that almost "any focus of instruction is more effective in improving the quality of writing than grammar and mechanics." The major question suggested by all the data was why grammar retains its appeal "when research over the past 90 years reveals not only that students do not learn it and are hostile toward it, but that the study of grammar has no impact on writing quality." The best answer they could come up with is that grammar is easy to teach, easy to grade, and "provides security in having 'right' answers." The grammar sections of a textbook should be used as a reference tool, they concluded, and not as a course of study. [84]

NOTES

[For full citations, please see the Reference section of [The Schools Our Children Deserve.](#)]

[1] The movement is not without persuasive defenders, some of whom are quoted in this chapter, but one can't help noticing that claims about how research supports direct phonics instruction are frequently left unanswered. To be more precise, some teachers have responded by saying, in effect, "Well, I know what works in my classroom" or "I don't trust research anyway." Some theorists, meanwhile, have responded by asserting that Whole Language isn't a technique that can be tested but a world view — and then launching into a discourse about patriarchal hegemony and liberatory praxis. Some of the leading figures in Whole Language, when questioned about research findings, reply that right-wing activists are behind all opposition to the approach, and let it go at that. Now, I believe there is some validity to each of these responses, but I also view with consternation the failure to give direct and potent answers to reasonable challenges about the empirical base of Whole Language. The impression is sometimes given that there isn't any research to support the practices associated with Whole Language, and this, as we'll see, couldn't be further from the truth.

[2] The argument that children's reading scores are miserable because schools have stopped teaching phonics is rather difficult to defend from the outset in light of the fact that children's reading scores aren't miserable, as I've pointed out elsewhere in this book. Also see McQuillan, 1998, chap. 1.

[3] Academics can be found taking all possible positions on the question of how children should learn to read. (That conservatives are quick to cite any study that seems to support their cause is ironic given their penchant for dismissing researchers in education and their work, referring to them derisively as "educationists" or part of what E. D. Hirsch, Jr. calls "Thoughtworld.") More to the point, teachers who have adopted a Whole Language approach have done so not because it was rammed down their throats by crusading educational theorists but because the idea seemed appealing and the results have been persuasive. Indeed, Whole Language is notable for being a "bottom-up," grassroots reform, driven by classroom teachers.

[4] See chapter 1 [of *The Schools Our Children Deserve*].

[5] Goodman is quoted in Steinberg, 1997. It may be possible to find a teacher who doesn't agree with this, who provides inadequate instruction, or who, in any number of other ways, implements a good theory badly. But it would be a mistake to attribute any of these things to Whole Language itself.

[6] If your child's school is using a packaged program like "Success for All" [see below], you should be outraged. Programs like this are typically reserved for low-income, mostly African American schools, a fact that should outrage all of us.

[7] Goodman, 1986, p. 361.

[8] Even traditional phonics teachers may go home and "create much richer literary environments for their own children" than they do with ours (Gallimore and Goldenberg, 1992, p. 204).

[9] Sulzby et al., 1993, p. 186. This is true regardless of race or income, the authors point out.

[10] Whole Language is sometimes confused with the "whole-word" (or "look-say") approach to reading instruction, which lies behind those deadly "See Dick run. Run, Dick, run" primers lurking in our repressed early memories. From a Whole Language perspective, the difference between phonics and whole-word techniques is insignificant compared to the difference between either of these and an approach based on meaning. One teacher, thinking about

various skills-based models, was reminded of Calvin Trillin's comment about fruitcakes: "The worst one isn't that much different from the best one" (Ohanian, 1994, p. 10).

[11] Dorothy Strickland (1998) calls this approach "whole-part-whole."

[12] From a journal entry by Rita Roth, quoted in Wirth, 1983, p. 142.

[13] The approach to reading is also reflected in the children's own comments. When first graders in a skills-based classroom were asked by a researcher what they could do, they said they could read "words, sentences, and the basal reader." When children in a Whole Language classroom were asked the same question, they replied that they could read books (Manning et al., 1989, p. 10).

[14] Some have speculated that this aspect of Whole Language may also help explain the virulent opposition by ultraconservatives.

[15] Routman, 1991, p. 26. Thus, it's possible for a teacher to use trade books instead of basal readers but to see the stories as separate from, and coming after, the skills work. "It is not unusual to see classrooms with no basals but where books of literature are read whole class, round-robin style. Seatwork consists of packets of vocabulary words to look up and lots of questions to answer in written form for each chapter. Even though literature is being used, children have few actual choices during reading time" (p. 25). Conversely, even where teachers do end up using basal readers - perhaps because they're required to do so - they can "skip the worksheets and meaningless activities and involve students in authentic responses to literature, including literature discussion groups and author study in connection with basal selections and/or supplemental trade books" (Routman, 1996, p. 126).

[16] Weaver et al., 1996, pp. 107, 31.

[17] Harste is quoted in Willis, 1995b, p. 2.

[18] Thanks to Smokey Daniels for pointing out the fifth variant.

[19] Plenty of similar examples, along with the remark about Flesch (attributed to Beverly Regelman), can be found in Weaver et al. At one point, these authors cite a study showing that even using 300 such rules, fewer than half of a list of 17,000 words would have been spelled correctly (p. 105).

[20] The first grader is quoted in Johnson, 1992.

[21] Smith, 1992, p. 439.

[22] Routman, 1996, pp. 77-78.

[23] Rothstein, 1998, p. 92.

[24] Campione et al., 1988, p. 98. An analogously skewed and sad impression is created by a skills-based focus in teaching math, they add. Of course, we could dismiss this concern by saying that children will be taught later on that reading is about meaning. But an initial skills emphasis has taught children to define reading "as a process of linking sounds to symbols," so when they subsequently encounter unfamiliar words, "they may revert to sounding it out. Unable to integrate the new concept of reading for meaning in a context, they fall back on their old perceptions and phonetic strategies and are no closer to understanding the word" (Noble

and Smith, 1994, p. 9).

[25] Likewise for writing. "When I started to love writing," one first grader commented, "is when we stopped copying letters and I got to write everything I know about dolphins" (quoted in an unpublished manuscript by Catherine Lewis, Eric Schaps, and Marilyn Watson, 1994).

[26] Patty's experience is related in Watson, 1989, pp. 138-41.

[27] Manzo, 1998a.

[28] Manzo, 1998c, pp. 32, 34.

[29] For an example, see Matson, 1996.

[30] One administrator comments, "When I interview prospective teachers, I always ask them how they teach reading. If a teacher says, 'I use what works, use whatever works,' I quickly show them to the door." After all, workbooks and "trivial questions at the end of chapters" could be said to "work" - at keeping kids "at their seats, silent, and busy. [But] not everything that works is good. Children who become hooked on phonics get a deceptive picture of what reading is. Children who read watered-down texts get used to them. Poor quality texts become the given. Children who must answer endless, inane questions after reading get a dangerous view of response to reading. If 'eclectic' means using phonics kits, flash cards, and laminated fill-in-the-blank passages, alongside a shelf of library books, I'm not interested" (Harwayne, 1994, p. 120).

[31] For research on this point, see Dickinson and DiGisi, 1998, p. 24.

[32] "I am reminded of a kindergartner who would not show me the sentence he had just written on the computer because not all the words were spelled correctly. I was delighted that he had phonemic awareness and could work independently at the computer. However, even though he was obviously very advanced, instead of being pleased with his accomplishment, he was anxious about his lack of perfection and felt inadequate. He felt far less satisfaction with his efforts than another child who busily and thoughtfully wrote sentence after sentence in his journal using a less advanced level of invented spelling. All other characteristics of these two 5-year-olds being equal, who is more likely to develop the disposition to be a writer?" (Wakefield, 1997, p. 236).

[33] This contrast comes from an unpublished, undated manuscript by Susan Sowers.

[34] Routman, 1996, p. 8.

[35] More accurately, it should be an issue only when children are first learning to read. The sad reality is that some students are subjected to phonics instruction all the way through elementary school.

[36] Daniels, 1993, p. 6.

[37] This could be contrasted, one supposes, with the more typical tendency to Drop Everything And Drill (DEAD).

[38] That includes paying attention to the writer's craft even while reading textbooks or other nonfiction. The quality of writing isn't relevant only to stories and poetry.

- [39] Routman, 1991, p. 48.
- [40] Anderman et al., 1996.
- [41] Sweet and Guthrie, 1996, p. 661.
- [42] See Kohn, 1993a; and McQuillan, 1997.
- [43] Joan Servis is quoted in Routman, 1996, p. 44.
- [44] Daniels et al., 1999.
- [45] Weaver and Brinkley, 1998, p. 137.
- [46] Much has been written on this subject by proponents of Whole Language, but one of the best articles is still a relatively early essay by Deborah Meier (1981) entitled "Why Reading Tests Don't Test Reading."
- [47] See Krashen, 1998.
- [48] When claims are made for the effectiveness of Direct Instruction and other skills-based techniques, it's worth asking not only what kind of effect has been shown (simple decoding vs. comprehension) but how the study was designed. This would seem to be a clear case where a comparison group using a different approach to reading instruction would be necessary. To show that DI produced gains doesn't say much in itself: The children might have grown more proficient even without the intervention, or they might have benefited from the extra resources and attention that came from the introduction of DI rather than from some characteristic of the program itself. (For more about DI, see the first part of this Appendix, dealing with research on early-childhood education.)
- [49] For a review of research on this question, see Weaver et al., 1996, esp. pp. 283-85. Also see McQuillan, 1998, chap. 5.
- [50] On this point, see note 10, above; and Weaver et al., p. 104.
- [51] Allington and Woodside-Jiron, 1998, p. 149.
- [52] Freeman and Freeman, 1998, p. 77.
- [53] NAEP scores weren't broken down on a state-by-state basis before 1992, so California scores that year can't be used to prove a decline from previous years. Nor do other kinds of tests permit the conclusion that reading achievement dropped during the period in question. See McQuillan, 1998, pp. 12-14.
- [54] McQuillan, pp. 82-83.
- [55] Freeman and Freeman, p. 78.
- [56] Ribowsky, 1985.
- [57] Manning et al., 1989.
- [58] Eldredge and Butterfield, 1986.

[59] Tunnell and Jacobs, 1989.

[60] Reutzel and Cooter, 1990.

[61] Varble, 1990. The same study compared two sixth-grade classrooms as well, and found no significant differences on mechanics or content between the two conditions.

[62] Morrow et al., 1990.

[63] Morrow, 1992.

[64] Klesius et al., 1991.

[65] Freppon et al., 1995.

[66] Freppon, 1991.

[67] McQuillan, p. 66.

[68] Weaver et al., p. 286. The authors acknowledge that direct instruction of phonics, "particularly with children labeled at risk or reading disabled, when they are tutored one-on-one or in very small groups," can produce "higher initial scores on phonemic awareness and word attack skills and sometimes on comprehension tests," but "this advantage appears not to last very long, particularly for comprehension tests."

[69] Allington, 1983, p. 554. A subsequent study of second and fourth graders in five varied school districts confirmed that "low achievement instructional groups frequently focused on oral reading accuracy and concentrated instruction at the word level. When larger units of text were the focus - stories, for instance - accuracy remained the critical feature of instruction, with oral reading tasks that evidenced little, if any, emphasis on comprehension" (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 1989, p. 83).

[70] See the discussion of this point and the accompanying citations in Fielding and Pearson, 1994.

[71] The first grade study: Milligan and Berg, 1992. The kindergarten study: Sacks and Mergendoller, 1997.

[72] Success for All, designed by Robert Slavin and his colleagues at Johns Hopkins University, "tells schools precisely what to teach and how to teach it - to the point of scripting, nearly minute by minute, every teacher's activity in every classroom every day of the year. . . . Teachers must use a series of catch phrases and hand signals developed by Success for All. In kindergarten and first grade every piece of classroom material (readers, posters, tapes, videos, lesson plans, books - everything) is provided by the program. . . . Success for All . . . teaches reading primarily through phonics. . . . Students are tested, put into groups based on their skill levels, drilled in reading skills, regrouped, and drilled some more. . . . The [first-grade] teacher stands at the blackboard and says, 'Okay, let's get ready for our shared story. Ready, read!' The students read the first page of the story loudly, in unison. . . . 'Okay, do your first word,' she says. The students call out together, 'Only! O [clap] N [clap] L [clap] Y [clap]. Only!' . . . 'If you work right, you'll earn points for your work team! You clear?' Twenty voices call out, 'Yes!'" (Lemann, 1998, pp. 98-99). Keep in mind that this account is offered by a journalist who supports the program, at least for poor children.

[73] Purcell-Gates et al., 1995, p. 678.

[74] Lisa Delpit, with whom this argument is often associated, has added that “literacy instruction should be in the context of real reading and real writing, and reading and writing for real purposes. This means using literature that children like and that connects with them in their homes and lives. It means writing for purposes the children find useful” (Delpit, 1992).

[75] Weaver et al., p. 104.

[76] Eldredge, 1991; Otto, 1993; and Purcell-Gates et al., 1995.

[77] The NAEP questionnaire results appear on pp. 451, 471, 501 of the National Reading Assessments, Data Almanac, available on the internet at www.nces.ed.gov/naep/y25alm/n04r1c.pdf.

[78] These NAEP results were cited in McQuillan, pp. 14, 90.

[79] Mixed results (a difference favoring WL in one study, no differences in two others) were obtained by one group of researchers who have generally been critical of WL (McKenna et al., 1995), but every other study I could find that measured attitudes, motivation, or reading outside of school demonstrated a clear advantage for WL or a literature-based program: Eldredge, 1991; Eldredge and Butterfield, 1986; Morrow, 1992; and Kasten and Clarke, 1989, a study that looked at disadvantaged minority children. (Also see the review of research on this topic in McQuillan, pp. 63-64.) Interestingly, even a recent study spearheaded by long-time advocates of direct instruction that claimed to show an advantage for that approach – a study widely cited by people of similar persuasion and harshly criticized for its methodology by WL advocates – found significantly more positive attitudes toward reading among the children receiving something that was supposed to resemble WL than among those getting a skills-based approach (Foorman et al., 1998, p. 50).

[80] Five studies are cited in support of this conclusion by Clarke, 1988, p. 281.

[81] Weaver et al., p. 270.

[82] Clarke, esp. pp. 295, 304.

[83] Elley et al., 1976. The quotation appears on p. 5.

[84] Hillocks and Smith, 1991. Quotations appear on pp. 597 and 600.

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