

# What Does a “Balanced Literacy Approach” Mean?

Sebastian Wren, Ph.D.

There have been, over the years, two general instructional approaches that have governed reading education. They have gone by many names, but today they are generally known as Phonics and Whole Language approaches. These approaches to reading instruction reflect very different underlying philosophies and stress very different skills. The philosophy underlying the Whole Language approach is that reading is a natural process, much like learning to speak, and that children exposed to a great deal of authentic, connected text will naturally become literate without much in the way of explicit instruction in the rules and conventions of printed text. The philosophy underlying the Phonics approach is quite different – Phonics advocates argue that in order to learn to read, most children require a great deal of explicit instruction in the rules of printed text.

## Whole Language and Phonics Approaches

A young child in a Whole Language classroom is provided with simple, predictable and repetitive text – frequently the text is already familiar to the child, making it that much easier to understand. Emphasis in a Whole Language classroom is not placed on reading precision and accuracy, but on comprehension and appreciation – children are not expected to read the text verbatim, they are allowed to insert and substitute words as long as the story still makes sense, and as long as the child is understanding the gist of the story. The primary goal of the Whole Language teacher is to foster a love for the act of



reading authentic and connected text, and to keep the process of reading instruction uncontrived.

In a Phonics classroom, by contrast, a great emphasis is placed on reading precision, and children are encouraged to read the words exactly as they appear on the page. Children are explicitly taught “rules” about the way words are written and spelled, and they are taught spelling-sound relationships. After a teacher provides an explicit lesson in a particular Phonics rule (e.g. if the last letter of a word is an “e,” then the first vowel is usually long), the child is presented with a passage of text

that contains many words consistent with that rule (called decodable text); this provides the child with the opportunity to apply each Phonics rule on a variety of words in the context of a passage. The goal of the Phonics teacher, then, is to instill children with the Phonics rules and the common spelling-sound relationships, and to teach children to apply this knowledge in sounding-out each word they encounter, making the assumption that comprehension and appreciation will be a natural consequence of accuracy.

Some people have characterized the fundamental difference between these two philosophies as being a debate between whether reading is “top-down” or “bottom-up.” The Whole Language advocates state that reading is “top-down” in that the meaning of the text is dependent upon the background knowledge and understanding that the reader brings. The reader forms hypotheses and makes predictions, and only samples the text occasionally to confirm those predictions.

By contrast, the Phonics approach could be described as “bottom-up” – Phonics advocates argue that if a person is able to correctly decode text, meaning and understanding will follow. The text contains the message, and through the act of decoding the text, the reader discovers what that message is.

### **The Great Debate (a.k.a. The Reading Wars)**

Educators have debated over which is the best approach to teach children to read for many years. The ancient Greeks began reading instruction by teaching the letters and the letter-sound relationships, and children did not attempt to decode any real words until they had mastered these basics. In the middle of the 19th century, the great

education reformer Horace Mann criticized the Phonics-like approach to reading instruction that was prevalent at the time, describing letters of the alphabet as “bloodless, ghostly apparitions.” He advocated more of a “whole word” approach to reading instruction. Late in the 19th century and early in the 20th century, the pendulum swung back towards “skills and drills” based instruction, such as the

McGuffey readers and the Beacon readers. Before the second World War, the pendulum of education back swung back again with the publication of the Scott Foresman’s “Dick and Jane” reading

***Some people have characterized the fundamental difference between these two philosophies as being a debate between whether reading is “top-down” or “bottom-up.”***

books that were more repetitive, emphasized simple words that were supposed to be in the child’s “sight vocabulary,” and which were highly predictable. Thus, the “look-say” approach to reading instruction became the predominant approach to reading instruction. In the midst of the Cold-War era, Rudolf Flesch published “Why Johnny Can’t Read,” which suggested that the look-say approach was more than merely educationally inappropriate, he characterized it as a threat to democracy. The pendulum once again swung back towards Phonics, but in addition, this book added very political overtones to what was already becoming a very heated debate. In the 1980s, educators rebelled against the contrived drills and worksheets that were common in the Phonics curricula; the pendulum swung back towards Whole Language and more “authentic” reading lessons, and the volatile nature of what has come to be known as “the Great Debate” became even more politically charged. With social and political conservatives having embraced Phonics as a traditionalist, back-to-basics approach to reading instruction, liberals embraced

Whole Language, describing the Whole Language approach as more “democratic” and even using terms like “elitist” and “racist” to describe the Phonics philosophy.

Arguably, the Great Debate, or what some have more appropriately dubbed the “reading wars,” has been one of the most destructive forces in reading education. The battles have grown from ideological differences to personal, politically charged attacks on character. Teachers, and more importantly children, have been caught in the crossfire.

Recently the National Academy of Sciences released an analysis of research in reading instruction called *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. In the preface to this book, the committee that authored it expressed their hopes that the research-based information provided in their report would “mark the end of the reading wars.” They state that, “The study reported in this volume was undertaken with the assumption that empirical work in the field of reading had advanced sufficiently to allow substantial agreed-upon results and conclusions that could form a basis for breaching the differences among the warring parties.” Their intent was to provide information about research-based reading instruction without regard to ideologies or sides in the reading wars. It was clearly their intention to simply promote the best information available about reading and reading instruction, and to ignore which “party” had promoted it in the past. Still, reviews of the report summarized the content with overly simplistic statements such as “researchers call for a balanced approach to end the reading wars.”

### **A Balanced Approach**

In fact, very few educators today would describe themselves as strict advocates of either a Phonics approach or a Whole

Language approach – most would describe their teaching as “balanced,” which, on the surface, has a great deal of appeal. Educators nationwide are promoting a “balanced” approach to reading instruction in an effort to bring an end to the reading wars. However, while an end to the reading wars could not possibly be more desirable, it is important to remember that a compromise between these two approaches to reading instruction will not necessarily result in the single, best approach. If either Phonics or Whole Language was even close to being the panacea of reading education, then there would not be a Great Debate. The fact is, there is not much evidence that either the Whole Language approach or the Phonics approach is particularly effective. As Marilyn Adams has said, “We have known for 30 years that Phonics did a better job at teaching reading than Whole Word – and now Whole Language – instruction. But, you know, it never was that much better.” Neither approach has been sufficiently effective, so why do we assume that a compromise between these two approaches will provide educators with the most effective approach possible?

While the pendulum of reading instruction has swung back and forth several times, reading performance for children has remained quite stable, and



unfortunately, quite poor. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has been used to assess major areas of education including reading performance since 1969. In 30 years, despite the different approaches to reading education that have prevailed at different times, reading scores have not really changed appreciably; about 40 percent of this country's fourth graders have always performed in the "below basic" category, while approximately 5 percent have been ranked in the "advanced" category at the other end of the distribution. Around the world, not just in the U.S., when either a Phonics approach or a Whole Language approach is adopted, an unacceptably large percentage of children fail to learn to read. According to the 1992 NAEP, most teachers in the U.S. adopted what they described as a balanced approach to reading instruction, but still the scores remained unacceptably low.

### **Problems with a Balanced Approach**

One possible contributing factor in the stability of the NAEP scores despite teachers moving to a more "balanced approach" to reading instruction stems from the fact that most people do not agree what the term "balanced approach" means. A balanced approach could be generically described as "mixing some Phonics with Whole Language," but how this is accomplished in any particular classroom is unclear. The eclectic approach, as some have come to call it, sometimes involves teaching Phonics first, and then "graduating" to Whole Language approaches. Alternatively, the Phonics instruction may be explicit, but children might be given more opportunities to read connected, authentic literature. Or, lessons prescribed by Phonics and Whole

Language may be intermixed in the hopes that different children will benefit from different "styles" of teaching. Similarly, it is not uncommon for teachers to use an amalgam of decodable text and predictable, repetitive text in a diplomatic approach to

***"We have known for 30 years that Phonics did a better job at teaching reading than Whole Word – and now Whole Language – instruction. But, you know, it never was that much better."***

balanced literacy instruction. The argument is often made that the best elements of each philosophy can be utilized while the worst are eliminated, but how are we to decide what the "best elements" are?

Should we assume that the two approaches represent the entire world of reading instruction, and that the "best elements" are to be found in one camp or the other? It is possible that some combination of the two approaches will work better than either approach alone did, but is it necessarily the best *possible* approach for each individual child?

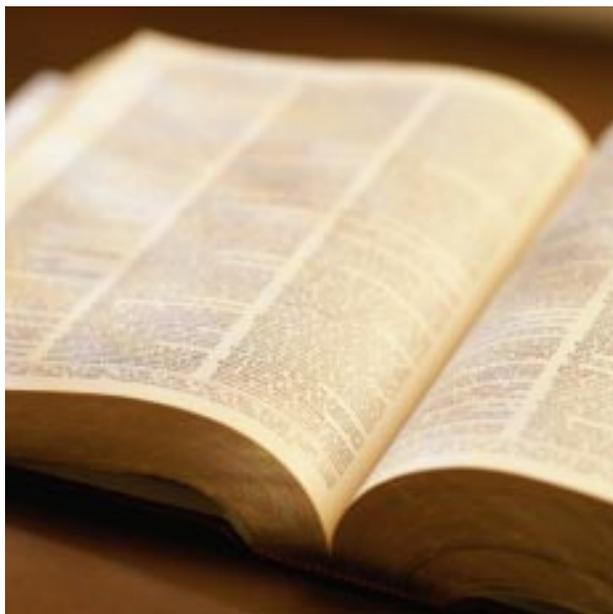
### **Science to the Rescue**

Research in reading is providing us with approaches and understanding that neither "camp" was able to provide – fresh ideas and new ways of thinking about reading and reading instruction that are not consistent with the tenets of either traditional Phonics or Whole Language philosophies are being substantiated and validated through empirical research. Teachers are now being encouraged to look beyond the restrictions of the traditional approaches to reading instruction, and to use research evidence to gain an understanding of the reading process that allows them to make clearer and more purposeful instructional decisions. More importantly, teachers are able to use the information provided by research to customize instructional strategies to individual children's needs – rather than creating lessons based on a philosophy or an approach, teachers can examine a

child's development in reading and respond with appropriate instruction.

As long as educators are in any way expected to base their educational decisions on the issues, debates, politics and polemics of the Great Debate, and as long as we limit our horizons to approaches and philosophies that have been advocated by one faction or another, there is no reason to believe that real progress in reading education will ever be made. Phonics approaches may be improved by incorporating elements of Whole Language instruction, or vice versa, but it is doubtful that the *best* approach to reading instruction will be scavenged from these two philosophies, and it is even less likely that any instruction that is not squarely centered on the individual student's learning needs will ever be universally effective.

Rather than picking the best elements from these two approaches, it seems sensible to simply ask what information about reading and reading instruction has been supported by research, and move forward from there. If we focus on what research has said about how children learn to read, and if we truly focus on the educational needs of each individual child that is learning to read, then we do not need to concern ourselves with striking any



sort of balance or making any compromises in our reading instruction. Educators should not be asking whether a lesson is Phonics-based or Whole Language-based, they should be asking whether a lesson is going to help a specific beginning reader to learn to read.

The most troubling aspect of the debate over Phonics, Whole Language and balanced approaches to reading instruction is that the interest and debate almost always focuses on the lessons and activities that a teacher should deliver (and the order in which those lessons and activities should be delivered). A typical Phonics teacher plans lessons weeks or months in advance. So does a Whole Language teacher. So does a teacher who is trying to balance these two approaches. But if instruction is to be customized on individual students' learning needs, teachers need to become more adept at planning lessons to focus on areas of instructional need that were revealed through artful assessment and observation of individual students. Lesson plans can be thought out in broad strokes in advance, but if instruction is to be truly effective, lesson plans need to be constantly revised to accommodate new assessment information, and lessons need to be customized to suit the learning needs of individual students. The Great Debate over reading instruction does not help teachers to develop more assessment driven, individualized instruction strategies.

As stated earlier, an end to the Reading Wars could not be more desirable, but the debate will not end as long as the focus of reading instruction is on the teacher and the activities and materials. The focus needs to shift to the student and the individual learning needs that can be revealed through assessment. Only when all teachers learn to diagnose student reading skills and responds with focused, deliberate instruction will literacy be available to all children. There is no debating that.