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How Psychological Science Informs the Teaching of Reading

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The greatest weakness of the public schools is their continuing ineffectiveness in reading instruction.

During the course of children's school careers, very many of their academic and behavioral problems stem from poor reading. Children who are poor readers in the early grades tend to fall further behind their peers, rather than grow out of it.

Background

In large part, poor reading skills stem from faulty teaching practices. In particular, teachers fail to systematically teach new readers how to "sound out" words, i.e., they fail to teach phonics. Without decoding skills, many children stumble, guess, acquire bad reading habits, and get discouraged.

Following World War II, the "whole-word" teaching method was popular. Also called the "look-say" approach, it taught reading by using repetitious materials that emphasized 50-100 words, e.g. "Run, Spot, run" from the famous Dick and Jane series. Phonics was an add-on, not an essential.

In more recent years, a teaching method that minimizes both decoding and repetition became popular. Called "whole-language" (or "literature-based instruction" or "guided reading"), it stressed student interest and enjoyment. It used so-called "embedded phonics," which worked even less well than the "whole-word" approach.

How could schools not notice that their methods weren't working?

Fortunately, many children come to school with literacy skills acquired at home. With them, any teaching method seems to work. Children who lack such advantages do less well but their failure is easily blamed on their parents and backgrounds. So instead of recognizing the problem, schools argued that their methods worked for many students; and for those who failed, better pre-school enrichment was needed.

A larger impediment was at work too: defective teacher training. Virtually every teacher and administrator who has been trained in a school of education has been taught to idealize naturalistic forms of teaching and to frown on their opposite, regardless of learning outcomes. Reading instruction that teaches discrete skills in an orderly sequence--i.e., that uses phonics--was, therefore, considered substandard despite its superior results.

Because it fit the template for good teaching, whole language was very attractive to educators despite its ineffectiveness with children who were most in need of good teaching. It was naturalistic and unstructured, and reading experts in schools of education assured that it was a “best practice.” That it was ineffective with disadvantaged students was said to be the result of insufficient time and effort by teachers and schools, not faulty teaching practices.

Whole-word and whole-language reading methods have dominated schools of education because those who run such schools have historically disputed the idea that the first job of the teacher is to instill prescribed knowledge and skills. In their view, phonics-based reading instruction may be effective but it is “unnatural,” and therefore entails the risk of detrimental side effects. In fact, ineffective reading instruction subjects children to handicaps far greater than the side effects imagined by phonics opponents.

The Call for Proven Methods

In the mid-eighties, California’s Department of Education mandated whole-language reading instruction statewide. By the mid-nineties, reading scores had fallen to the point that they became a public scandal and a major political issue. In 1995, the California State Assembly relied on outside experts to develop and pass a bill mandating the use of phonics-based reading instruction.

In 1993, Massachusetts enacted legislation that resulted in the state curriculum becoming infused with whole-language. In the ensuing controversy, 40 leading linguistic scholars signed a protest letter addressed to state authorities. Eventually the guidelines were rewritten.

In 1997, Congress authorized and the U. S. Department of Education convened a National Reading Panel (NRP). Its mission was to examine the research on reading instruction and make recommendations. The NRP’s report was published in 2000, and the report on which this Briefing is based was published a year later (click title above for the full report).

Both reports are authoritative, and both conclude that phonics-based reading instruction is indispensable. The activities called for by the whole-language approach can be used to make reading more fun and interesting, but they are not a substitute for reading instruction that systematically and explicitly teaches decoding skills.

The poor outcomes of public school reading instruction are essentially a product of ineffective teaching and defective teacher training. Reform will require significant retraining at all levels of the schooling establishment, beginning with the schools of education.

The Education Consumers Consultants Network is an alliance of experienced and credentialed educators dedicated to serving the needs of parents, policymakers, and taxpayers for independent and consumer-friendly consulting. For more information, contact J. E. Stone, Ed.D., at (423) 282-6832, or write: professor@education-consumers.com