

Reading Process and Practice

*From Socio-Psycholinguistics to
Whole Language*

SECOND EDITION

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Summary of Comments on Weaver- highlighted scan293-310.pdf

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Weaver's textbook--now in a 3rd edition--has been widely used in teacher training courses for over 20 years: <http://www.heinemann.com/products/E00377.aspx>

It is one of several popular textbooks advocating the use of "whole language" reading instruction. Its recommendations for teachers are at odds with those of the National Reading Council's 1998 report on preventing reading difficulties in young children and the National Reading Panel's 2000 synthesis of the literature pertaining to reading instruction.

About 40% of children will not learn to read without explicit reading instruction and the use of phonics--a view adamantly opposed by whole-language enthusiasts.

Whole language is probably the single most important reason that schools in TN and other states have failed to improve early reading despite decades of effort. In CA, for example, whole language was virtually outlawed after the state's reading scores dropped to among the lowest in the country:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/97nov/read.htm>

Despite authoritative findings to the contrary, whole language and its offspring, "balanced" literacy, are still widely advocated by teacher educators. For example, see *Big Brother and the National Reading Curriculum, How Ideology Trumped Evidence* edited by Professor Richard Allington of the University of Tennessee. <http://www.heinemann.com/products/E00513.aspx>

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7 Phonics and Whole Language: From Politics to Research

If American education existed in a rational world, it would be clear that whole language brings together and is based in modern research in language, learning, and teaching.

— Kenneth Goodman

The subject of phonics is difficult to deal with, since people understand and define it in various ways. In this book, I've usually used the term *phonics* in the context of *teaching*. I've indicated that phonics is sometimes promoted as a method of teaching reading, even though its function is much more limited. Usually, I've used the term phonics as it is widely employed, to describe the teaching of letter/sound relationships and patterns. Sometimes I use the phrase "phonics knowledge" to describe the patterns themselves: what readers have learned about letter/sound relationships. Context usually indicates my precise intention. However, the term "phonics" still needs further clarification.

There are basically two camps that advocate *systematic phonics*: those who think phonics should be taught extensively and intensively, and those who think it should be taught systematically but not extensively and/or intensively. People in both groups are usually considered phonics advocates. In contrast are those who recommend less systematic, *intrinsic phonics*: phonics knowledge developed in the context of meaningful reading, and therefore intrinsic to it. Most of this group think children should receive some direct help in developing grapho/phonemic knowledge, but that this help can be *incidental* rather than systematic because **beginning children who write with invented spelling and who read environmental print and predictable texts will usually acquire grapho/phonemic understandings with relatively little direct assistance.** The latter group includes most whole language educators and advocates.

This chapter deals with these three major stances in turn. First, we consider the nature and the hidden agenda of extensive and intensive phonics. Second, we consider the argument for systematic (but not extensive or intensive) phonics, and the research evidence; this leads logically to a critique of that evidence and line of reasoning and into the research evidence for whole language—and for developing grapho/phonemic understandings more incidentally, in the context of authentic reading and writing experiences. Finally, we summarize the tentative conclusions from this research and consider the promise and limitations of whole language.

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With occasional exceptions, most of the highlighting below simply points to the blatant political and ideological nature of the discussion. Weaver's textbook is written for undergraduate and graduate students who are learning how to teach children to read.

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The core idea of this methodology is that children will learn to read on their own with sufficient exposure to print.

THE HIDDEN AGENDA OF EXTENSIVE, INTENSIVE PHONICS

My interest in the possible hidden agendas of heavy phonics instruction was aroused in 1989 when a U.S. Senate Republican Policy Committee document on phonics was read into the *Congressional Record*. Titled "Illiteracy: An Incurable Disease or Education Malpractice?" this paper was in effect a rallying cry for extensive and intensive phonics instruction. Ostensibly drawing conclusions from the available research, the apparent author of the report [2]Robert W. Sweet, concluded: "The overwhelming evidence from research and classroom results indicates that the cure for the 'disease of illiteracy' is the restoration of the instructional practice of intensive, systematic phonics in every primary school in America!" ("Illiteracy," 1989, p. 13).

This is demonstrably untrue. Before considering research evidence, however, we need to describe this kind of phonics instruction more clearly, discuss the source of advocacy for such instruction, and clarify its hidden agenda.


The Nature of Extensive, Intensive Phonics Instruction


What does it mean to teach phonics extensively and intensively? Essentially what the terms imply: to teach *a lot* of phonics and to teach it *hard*, typically before introducing children to coherent texts.


A program called *Explode the Code* offers one example. It includes twelve workbooks, preceded by three primers. Book 1, for instance, introduces short vowels; Book 1½ offers additional exercises on short vowel sounds. Book 2 deals with initial and final consonant blends, Book 2½ reviews these; and so forth. This program is distributed by Educators Publishing Service, which also sells *Primary Phonics*, a six-workbook program, followed by *More Primary Phonics*. [3]here's a home teaching version of the famed DISTAR program, *Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons* (Englemann, Haddox, & Bruner, 1983). Even better known is *Hooked on Phonics* (Gateway Educational Products), a widely advertised program consisting of eight cassette tapes; nine decks of flash cards depicting letters, letter sequences, and words; four books of word lists corresponding to phonic features in the card decks; and one book of sentences corresponding to the word lists ("Reading educators . . .," 1991). Competing with *Hooked on Phonics* is the newer *You Can Read!* (1993) consisting of two one-and-a-half hour videotapes, three workbooks, and a helper's manual. Something of a maverick, Samuel Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* (1983) also provides extensive and intensive attention to letter/sound patterns, but simply by presenting words in patterned lists, not teaching the patterns per se; thus the program is based on the (psycho)linguistic principle that readers only need exposure to the patterns to induce them (see Chapter 3).

Who advocates the teaching of extensive and intensive phonics? Typically it is not reading researchers or educators, even those who advocate systematic phonics [4]Patrick Groff is an exception; see, for instance, Groff, 1989). For example, among reading educators, even leading phonics advocates have denounced the *Hooked on Phonics* program as promising more than it can deliver (Kantrowitz, 1991). It is mainly laypersons—that is, those with no educational background in the process or the teaching of

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Sweet's view has been corroborated many times, most notably by the National Reading Panel in 2000.

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This book is based on Engelmann's Direct Instruction--created in the late sixties. It has been used successfully by parents and homeschoolers for decades. At this point in the history of education, DI may be the most well supported teaching methodology ever developed.

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Professor Groff is a long standing member of the Education Consumers Foundation's network of educational consultants.

reading—who advocate the extensive and intensive teaching of phonics.

1 typically, the impetus for teaching phonics extensively and intensively comes from certain leaders and their organizations among the political and religious Far Right. The following quote from the newsletter of Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum seems fairly typical of these groups:

With true phonics, the child is first taught to recognize the letters of the alphabet and then is drilled in the letter sounds—first vowels, then consonants, then consonant-vowel combinations—so that the child develops an automatic association between letters and sounds. When that is accomplished, the child is then given words, sentences, and stories to read. ("Civil Rights," 1989, p. 3).

Notice that the author is advocating phonics *first*: before giving children the opportunity to read real literature—or even sentences!


2 here is substantial evidence that advocacy for heavy phonics instruction is coming particularly from certain individuals and organizations within the Far Right. For instance, the ultraright National Association of Christian Educators (NACE) and its action group Citizens for Excellence in Education (CEE) urge their Christian followers to insist upon the teaching of phonics in the schools (R. L. Simonds, 1984)—as if the schools have not been teaching phonics for years within basal reading programs. (Obviously, the phonics of basal programs is not extensive or intensive enough, and is contaminated by reading itself.) A publication of the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank in Washington, extols phonics as "the very first tenet of the back to basics approach," which is advocated as the best approach to the illiteracy problem (Allen, 1989, p. 8).

What motivates such advocacy? Oddly enough, it may not necessarily be what proponents claim: namely, the desire to teach all children to read. 3 great deal of the force behind such advocacy seems to be the desire to promote a religious agenda and/or to maintain the socioeconomic status quo.

Major Far Right leaders and groups include: Dr. Robert Simonds, director of the National Association of Christian Educators and the local and state branches that are often called Citizens for Excellence in Education, or CEEs; Samuel Blumenfeld, author, and editor of *The Blumenfeld Education Letter*; Robert W. Sweet, president of the National Right to Read Foundation (a pro-phonics organization) and publisher of its *Right to Read Report*; Norma and Mel Gabler, founders of Educational Research Analysts; Phyllis Schlafly, newspaper columnist and director of the Eagle Forum; Rev. Pat Robertson, host of the 700 Club on television; Rev. Jerry Falwell, founder of Liberty Federation; Beverly LaHay, director of Concerned Women for America; such groups as The Heritage Foundation, Pro-Family Forum, and the American Freedom Coalition; and U.S. Senators Orrin Hatch and Jesse Helms. Addresses for such organizations are included in Janet Jones' *What's Left After the Right?* (1990) and *No Right Turn* (1993). These also include information on organizations that combat censorship and the Far Right's attempt to impose its agenda on the public schools. These organizations include People for the American Way, American Civil Liberties Union, Americans for Religious Liberty, National Education Association, Council of Chief State School Officers, The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the International Reading Association.

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The Hidden Agenda

Of course, it's important to note at the outset that by no means all members of the religious or political Far Right share an interest in promoting extensive and intensive phonics. Nevertheless, there is considerable agreement among at least some of the aforementioned leaders and the political action groups they have founded to control what will and what won't be taught in schools.


At least some Far Right religious leaders and groups seem to vest unquestioned authority in the church, the home, and the school—insofar as school serves the interests of the other two. **Neither church nor parental authority nor the authority of the Scriptures is to be questioned, it appears, and whole language—which insists that individual interpretation of texts is not only permissible but inevitable—is charged with promoting Godlessness (e.g., Blumenfeld, 1992, 1994).**

What does this have to do with phonics? A lot. Members of the Far Right who emphasize getting the words "right" and value so-called literal recall rather than construction of meaning also tend to insist upon the extensive and intensive teaching of phonics. Having children do extensive and intensive work with phonics suits their worldview. For example, James A. Chapman explicitly argues against a psycholinguistic view of reading in his pamphlet titled *Why Not Teach Intensive Phonics?* (1986). Specifically, he insists that intensive teaching of phonics is necessary because only the ability to sound out unfamiliar words will guarantee word-perfect reading. According to Chapman, "whenever initial emphasis is placed upon meaning instead of upon identifying the exact words that are on the page, a student is implicitly learning that individual words are not important" (p. 13). Of course, Chapman's does not necessarily represent the views of most Christians when he writes:

Individual words may not be important to "progressive" educators (for whom excellence in education has never been a goal), but **the emphasis upon individual words has always been of paramount importance to Christian educators, who believe in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures and in quality education.** Orthodox Christians believe that God gave every word of Scripture, not just the thoughts. . . . Christians therefore who are training young people to respond to Jesus' command to "live by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4) should reject a system of reading that trains students to guess at words and to be content with approximate meanings. . . . If one uses the whole-word method, which treats phonetic words as if they were ideographs, one can get away from stability, from standards, from restraint, from traditional pronunciation, from traditional spelling, and from correct and incorrect forms of speech. Such freedom is delightful to the "progressives," but not to Christians who see the importance of standards in all areas of life and thus are striving for excellence in education. (pp. 13–15).

Thus teaching intensive phonics is a way of maintaining "standards." It is also a way of keeping children's attention on doing what they're told and keeping them from reading or thinking for themselves. Furthermore, the curriculum is controlled by skills materials, which means it is not subject to teacher or student interest or whim but is readily

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monitored by parents. (This line of reasoning is further developed in Weaver, 1992a, and Brinkley, 1991; see also the relevant information sheet in Center for the Expansion of Learning and Teaching, 1992, and in Edelsky, 1993). We have drawn upon writings from and about the religious Far Right in coming to these conclusions and in coming to understand the Far Right's objections to whole language—objections that they typically relate to or hide under other guises, such as their fear (whether alleged or real) that children are not learning phonics. For example, Blumenfeld (1992, 1994) charges that "Whole language is a way of preventing children from becoming fluent, accurate phonetic readers" (p. 7; see also Blumenfeld, 1992b). Notice the concern for accuracy in identifying words and for sounding out words, along with the lack of concern for constructing meaning. (Other resources that reflect or shed light on the Far Right's educational agenda include Groothuis, 1988; Marrs, 1987; Martin, 1989; Schott, 1989; and Moffett, 1988). At the extreme, someone even said once in a public hearing that "God believes in the beauty of phonics" (Moffett, 1988, p. 226).

The Political Connection


1 at least some elements within the religious Far Right are eager to preserve the authority of home and church and therefore, it seems, to promote forms of instruction that require adherence to a prescribed and thought-limiting curriculum, so some elements within the political Far Right are equally eager to preserve the socioeconomic status quo.


2he political Far Right's agenda is well-served by promoting docility and obedience—on the part of the lower classes. The school is an ideal vehicle for teaching and preserving socioeconomic stratification. We assess students; divide them into "ability" groups, different tracks, and regular versus resource rooms; and teach them differently, according to their alleged ability. By the time they leave school, those in the lower groups/tracks/programs have generally lived down to the expectations of others and accepted their lower-class status (e.g., McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991; Anderson & Pellicer, 1990).


3ar-fetched? That's what I used to think, until I began reading more and more of so-called critical theory (e.g., Apple, 1982; Giroux, 1983; Shor, 1986; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991). This reading and my subsequent reflection have convinced me that such stratification is not innocent—that, for example, recent government and business insistence upon more standardized tests for "accountability" is, in significant measure, an attempt to make schools even more effective as a means of preserving social stratification.

The Hidden Curriculum

From one point of view, though, what matters is not whether certain groups *try* to keep children passive and obedient, but what actually happens to them during their schooling. Therefore, what I want to address next is the hidden agenda of heavy phonics instruction—the probable educational, political, and social consequences of such instruction,

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regardless of whether such consequences are or are not a conscious agenda of those who promote phonics and more phonics.

Much of what students learn in school is not the overt curriculum, the content that is explicitly taught, if not necessarily learned. What students learn from schooling other than the overt content is often called the *hidden curriculum*. Because of its pervasiveness, the hidden curriculum may constitute more of what students learn in school than anything that is explicitly taught (Giroux, 1983, pp. 42-71; Shor, 1986, pp. 168-173; Lester & Onore, 1990, pp. 9, 15-35).

The hidden curriculum includes, but is not limited to, what is learned through the very organization and structure of schools: through the way authority and power are distributed and decisions made in the classroom and the school; through the omission or inclusion of content and materials from the curriculum and the library; through the way decisions about content and curriculum are made; through the way knowledge is dispensed or learning facilitated; through the rules for behavior and the way these are determined and enforced; through the way interpersonal conflicts and discipline are handled; and through the way success is measured and failure determined. To put it somewhat differently, the hidden curriculum resides not only in what is included and what excluded from the curriculum, but also in the means by which curriculum and school policies are determined and the way that the teaching/learning enterprise and evaluation are carried out—the *how* of schooling. These depend significantly upon who makes these curricular and instructional decisions.

Heavy phonics instruction reflects the assumptions of a transmission model of education, and the hidden curriculum inherent in that model. Some basics of that model are that:

1. Learning consists primarily of mastering skills and facts; it requires correct habit formation.
2. Teachers are expert technicians, dispensing the curriculum directly. The curriculum controls what teachers will teach and what students will learn.
3. Students are passive recipients of knowledge. They learn primarily by practicing skills taught by the teacher or the workbook, and by memorizing information.

When such implicit assumptions direct the development of curriculum guides and instructional materials, control and decision making are primarily autocratic and authoritarian. Both teachers and students are devalued and disempowered.

Clearly, these assumptions underlie phonics instruction that is both extensive and intensive. Heavy phonics instruction trains students to be passive and obedient, not to be active in their own learning. This may be another reason why such instruction appeals to businesspeople and politicians, who are accustomed to top-down control. It simply reflects their assumptions about how the world should be run. But more important, such instruction contributes to maintaining the unequal distribution of money and power among different social and ethnic groups.

The mechanisms by which this occurs bear scrutiny.




Intensive Phonics and Skills for the Less Advantaged

Whether ultraconservative forces are consciously aware of it or not, intensive skills instruction, including intensive phonics instruction, tends to promote the traditional conservative agenda of maintaining a stratified society, through both the hidden and the overt curriculum (for the socioeconomic connection, see Anyon, 1980; for an emphasis on the effects of heavy skills work, see L. W. Anderson & Pellicer, 1990; McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991; Allington, 1991). The process whereby education maintains the status quo goes something like this:

1. Students from nonmainstream homes, typically lower socioeconomic and minority children, are often judged unready for school, lacking in the experiences and therefore the skills that will ensure success—specifically, certain emergent literacy skills already developed by many mainstream children (P. Shannon, 1985, 1989b, 1992; Giroux, 1983).
2. Such students are then assigned to lower “ability” groups. In particular, there is not only a strong correlation between reading group and social class, but even some evidence that social class may itself be (or formerly have been) a strong determinant of what ability group children are assigned to (Rist, 1970; see summaries in McDermott, 1974, and Hamilton, 1983).
3. Nonmainstream students, especially those in so-called lower ability groups or tracks, typically receive authoritarian instruction that serves to socialize them into subordinate roles. This is part of the hidden curriculum of the schools.
4. For such students, the overt curriculum—in language arts and reading, particularly—consists more of completing worksheets on isolated skills, such as phonics, than of reading and constructing meaning from connected texts.
5. Such instruction prevents these students from achieving their potential as readers. They become not only less successful as measured by standardized tests of reading, but often less successful in reading authentic texts as well; in short, they become less effective and therefore less motivated readers.
6. Because education in our schools depends so heavily upon the ability to read, these less successful readers typically are offered a less challenging education than their more advantaged mainstream counterparts. Ultimately, they tend simply to receive less education: they drop out of school.
7. Having received less education, such students typically must settle for lower-paying, lower-status jobs.
8. Thus, they in turn are likely to raise families that are nonmainstream, at least in economic terms. And their nonmainstream children all too often go through the same cycle.

Since the crux of the issue is the nature and the effects of such differential instruction for mainstream and nonmainstream students, we need to consider this in more detail.

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Professor Richard Allington at the University of Tennessee is one of the foremost exponents of this viewpoint.

1 Differential Reading Instruction

Keep in mind that a vastly disproportionate number of nonmainstream students are assigned to lower reading groups, on the grounds that they do not have the requisite background or skills for the higher reading groups.

Significantly, the *manner* of instruction in lower reading groups socializes these students for subordinate roles in school and in society. In addition, the *content* of such instruction tends to prevent these students from learning to read well enough to achieve more rewarding roles. Thus, both the manner and the content of instruction for students in lower reading groups contrasts significantly with the reading instruction offered those in higher reading groups—typically, the more advantaged, mainstream students.

The differential instruction afforded students considered “good” and “poor” readers is well documented in a variety of studies, as mentioned by Pinnell (1989) and summarized by McGill-Franzen & Allington (1991), Shannon (1985), Hillerich (1985), and Cazden (1985); see Figure 7.1 for full references for key sources. Notice how the curriculum, both hidden and overt, differs for those labeled “good” and “poor” readers:

1. Readers in lower groups spend approximately 70 to 75 percent of their time in oral reading, done round robin—in trying to say the words correctly while the teacher listens and corrects. Readers in higher groups spend about 70 to 75 percent of their time reading silently, for meaning and enjoyment (Allington, 1983).
2. When readers in higher groups make a miscue, teachers typically ignore the miscue or suggest how the context may help to clarify meaning. But when readers in lower groups make a miscue, teachers typically stop them and often call attention to the

Allington, R. L. (1983). The reading instruction provided readers of differing reading abilities. *The Elementary School Journal*, 83, 548-559.

Allington, R. L., & McGill-Franzen, A. (1989). Different programs, indifferent instruction. In D. Lipsky & A. Gartner (Eds.), *Beyond separate education: Quality education for all* (pp. 75-98). Baltimore: Park Brookes.

Anderson, L. W., & Pellicer, L. O. (1990). Synthesis of research on compensatory and remedial education. *Educational Leadership*, 48, 10-16.

Hillerich, R. L. (1985). Let's pretend. *Michigan Journal of Reading*, 18 (Summer), 15-18, 20.

McGill-Franzen, A. & Allington, R. L. (1991). The gridlock of low reading achievement: Perspectives on practice and policy. *Remedial and Special Education*, 12(3) 20-30.

Shannon, P. (1985). Reading instruction and social class. *Language Arts*, 62, 604-613.

FIGURE 7.1 References on the nature and effects of instruction for lower-group readers and/or students in remedial and compensatory programs

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The discussion in this section unequivocally condemns the very type of teaching practices that were most recently used to such positive effect in the Elgin Foundation's "Break the Cycle" initiative.





letter/sound cues exclusively, or correct the miscues immediately, giving the students in lower groups much less time to discover a lack of continuity in meaning and to correct themselves.

3. Reading lessons for lower groups are more teacher-centered, more tightly monitored, and more likely to focus on literal interpretation of text rather than upon drawing inferences, analyzing, evaluating, and extending or relating to what has been read (Brophy & Good, 1986).
4. Readers in lower groups receive much more drill on isolated words than do readers in higher groups. The lower-group readers are kept busy practicing skills with workbooks and dittos, and they may be drilled on word lists and flash cards. The higher-group readers read whole books and participate in creative ways of enhancing and expressing comprehension.

¹The students who seem most likely to be condemned to such authoritarian and stultifying instruction are those taught in compensatory Chapter 1 programs for the disadvantaged, and those called learning disabled. It is well documented that students in compensatory or special education programs often receive kinds of instruction that serve to perpetuate their status as labeled readers; it is also well documented that such students are often indistinguishable from others on the basis of their reading alone (Allington, 1983, 1987; Allington, Struetzel, & Shake, 1986; Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989; Ysseldyke, Thurlow, Mecklenburg, & Graden, 1984; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, & McGue, 1982).

²It should not be surprising that such mind-numbing instruction prevents these students from achieving their potential as readers. After all, it is not the completion of skills work that produces good readers, but extensive experience reading authentic texts (R. C. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, pp. 75-76). It is no wonder that for many students, being assigned to a compensatory Chapter 1 class or a special education class amounts to a life sentence of inferiority (L. W. Anderson & Pellicer, 1990; McGill-Franzen & Allington, 1991). Rex Brown, in his book *Schools of Thought* (1991), uses the example of a "successful" all-black school district to demonstrate how an exclusive focus on basic skills, even where there is strong community support for education, prevents students from aspiring to or attaining a level of achievement beyond that of their parents. ³The vicious cycle of exclusion from mainstream society is maintained, to a significant degree, by overemphasis on basic skills instruction, including phonics, and a concomitant underemphasis on reading for meaning and enjoyment.

Unfortunately, this vicious cycle is all too likely to be encouraged by the summary of Marilyn Adams' book *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* (1990a) written by Stahl, Osborn, and Lehr (Adams, 1990b) and cited approvingly by Far Right phonics advocates even before it was published ("Illiteracy," 1989). It is clear from Adams' own book (1990a) that she advocates extensive and enriched literacy experiences *first*, especially for children who have not had such experiences in the home. The authors of the summary of Adams' book seem to share this view (e.g., Stahl, 1992), but this does not come through clearly in the summary itself. There, the authors state:

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The derogatory statements found in this section can only be described as whole-language apologetics unsupported by any credible science.				
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	Number: 4	Author: Administrator	Subject: Highlight	Date: 4/25/2012 9:12:08 AM

[1] For children who enter school with almost no relevant knowledge of print, much of the content of the beginning reading lessons will be new in detail and concept and, as a consequence, more confusing and harder to put together [than for children who already have already had extensive exposure to books].

To make sure that all necessary letter-sound pairs are learned well, teachers must see to it that [these low-readiness] students receive sufficient practice with each pair, and that they evaluate what their students are learning. (Adams, 1990b; the language is similar to that in Adams, 1990a, pp. 239-240)

Unfortunately, statements such as these are already being used to justify intensive and extensive phonics instruction for allegedly less prepared readers (D. Taylor, 1991a). Given past practices and effects, it seems likely that such heavy phonics instruction will serve to perpetuate the nonmainstream status of many of these students: through the overt curriculum, which keeps them busy with skills work instead of real reading; and through the hidden curriculum, which socializes students for subordinate roles, both in school and in society.

SYSTEMATIC PHONICS

Among reading researchers and educators, almost all who advocate the direct and systematic teaching of phonics also insist that such teaching nevertheless be relatively simple and brief (e.g., Stahl, 1992).

For example, *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (R. C. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) is often cited in justification of heavy phonics instruction. But in fact the authors of the report clearly see phonics instruction as playing a very limited role in reading development. The report issues such warnings as these (pp. 38-43):

1. The purpose of phonics instruction is to reveal the *alphabetic principle*, the fact that there is a relationship (however inexact) between letters and sounds in the English language.
2. Phonics instruction should teach only the most important and regular of letter/sound relationships.
3. Phonics can be expected to help children come up with only approximate pronunciations that must be checked against their knowledge of real words and against the context in which the words occur.
4. A number of reading programs try to teach too many letter/sound relationships; thus, much of today's phonics instruction is probably unnecessary and unproductive.
5. It is not important that children be able to state the "rules" governing letter/sound relationships; they need only have a working knowledge of basic relationships.

Other statements in *Becoming a Nation of Readers* further clarify that phonics is not to be considered a *method* for teaching reading; rather, it is only one cue system used in identifying words.

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Overwhelming empirical evidence supports Adams' view. Training of the sort that Adams describes is precisely what virtually every present-day reading reform group in TN and nationwide recognizes as a top priority.

In her widely cited book *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* (1990a), Marilyn Adams suggests teaching just onsets and rimes: the beginnings of words, particularly initial consonants and consonant clusters, and the parts that enter into rhymes: letter patterns like *-ate*, *-est*, *-ice*, *-unk*, and so forth. She cites Wylie and Durrell (1970), who have pointed out that nearly five hundred primary-grade words can be derived from a set of only thirty-seven rimes. Vowel sounds in these rime patterns are quite stable, so teaching rime patterns is far more useful than teaching vowel sounds in isolation.

Oddly enough, considering her fairly moderate suggestion for teaching phonics systematically, Adams notes throughout the book that research supports the "intensive" teaching of phonics (e.g., p. 13). Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that her book has been cited as "proving" that phonics should be taught extensively and intensively. In fact, however, the research base is ambiguous and open to challenge. Furthermore, Adams has totally ignored the other side of the coin, entirely omitting from consideration the rich body of professional literature on children's literacy development in whole language classrooms.

Research Supporting the Systematic Teaching of Phonics

The classroom research Adams cites in favor of teaching phonics systematically is mainly that cited by Jeanne Chall in *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967, updated 1983), and the twenty-seven U.S. Office of Education studies as analyzed and summarized by Bond and Dykstra (1967).

At the outset of her study, Chall admitted, "One of the most important things, if not *the* most important thing, I learned from studying the existing research on beginning reading is that it says nothing consistently. . . . Taken as a whole, the research on beginning reading is strongly inconclusive" (Chall, 1967, pp. 87, 88). But guided by her theoretical perspective, Chall attempted to create order out of the chaos of conflicting data (Chall, 1989, pp. 524-528).

Because Chall's original conclusions are often oversimplified and then cited as definitive, these conclusions are worth quoting in detail:

In summary, judging from the studies comparing systematic with intrinsic phonics, we can say that systematic phonics at the very beginning tends to produce generally better reading and spelling achievement than intrinsic phonics, at least through grade 3.

More specifically, the child who begins with systematic phonics achieves early superiority in word recognition. This superior ability may not always show up on standardized silent reading (comprehension and vocabulary) tests in the first grade. But by the second and third grades, greater facility in recognizing words probably increases his ability to read for meaning, as measured by standardized silent reading tests of vocabulary and comprehension.

As for rate, systematic phonics may produce slower readers in grades 1 and 2 because it develops greater concern for working out the words. However, by

the middle grades, rate seems to be about equal to that produced by intrinsic phonics.

Finally, there is probably a limit to the advantage that early facility with the code gives on comprehension tested after grade 4. After this point intelligence, experience, and language maturity probably become more important factors in success than ability to recognize words. (Chall, 1967, p. 114)

Thus, according to this early synthesis, systematic phonics produces higher scores on tests of reading and spelling "achievement," but only through the primary grades.

Much the same conclusion is drawn by Bond and Dykstra (1967) in their consideration of the twenty-seven USOE cooperative first-grade studies conducted during 1965-66. In a later summary of his conclusions favoring phonics, Dykstra says:

The evidence clearly demonstrates that children who receive early intensive instruction in phonics develop superior word recognition skills in the early stages of reading and tend to maintain their superiority at least through the third grade. These same pupils tend to do somewhat better than pupils enrolled in meaning-emphasis (delayed gradual phonics) programs in reading comprehension at the end of the first grade. (1974, p. 397)

Thus, these studies would seem to favor systematic phonics over intrinsic phonics; at least for grades 1 through 3, and at least according to standardized measures. Marilyn Adams (1990a) cites two studies that she thinks demonstrate positive longer-term effects from the early teaching of intensive, systematic phonics (Becker & Gersten, 1982; Gersten & Keating, 1987), but few are likely to find the evidence from these studies convincing. (For a fuller treatment, see Weaver, 1990b). Even Gersten himself has agreed, at least with reference to the earlier study (Gersten, 1990).

The Research Critiqued

It is important to note that evidence for the systematic teaching of phonics is all based upon reading "performance" or "achievement," as measured on standardized tests that typically test letter/sound knowledge and word knowledge in isolation. Even the comprehension portions of such tests typically test comprehension "skills." The tests do not consider such factors as whether children are developing effective reading strategies, whether they can actually read environmental print and books, and whether they can write using letters to represent sounds. Thus, reading "performance" and "achievement" have to do with scores on tests of isolated skills, not with the ability to actually read, comprehend, and enjoy real texts.

So where does this leave us?

For one thing, some scholars have interpreted some of the research differently, while others have critiqued the validity of the research studies and therefore the conclusions drawn by phonics advocates. Others have questioned at least the significance of the research results. Whole language educators have been among the challengers.

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Although beyond the present discussion, there is legitimate concern about achievement gains beyond the primary grades even with students who have mastered reading. The acquisition of reading skills cannot work to the maximum benefit of students without an upgraded curriculum in upper elementary and subsequent grades.

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Gersten and Keating's report found that even though DI substantially improved reading skills, academic tools alone did not prevent a substantial number of students from dropping out:

http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_198703_gersten.pdf

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Again, the discussion veers into whole-language apologetics.

Chall admitted in her 1983 update of *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967) that several other reviews of the USOE studies (e.g., Corder, 1971) did not conclude that code-emphasis approaches (typically phonics) were superior to meaning-emphasis approaches, even when measured just by standardized tests. Chall wrote:

Yet many of the summaries of the USOE studies, and particularly the interpretations of their findings, contradicted this [her own] conclusion. Only a few indicated that the results showed an advantage for a heavier code-emphasis. Several, in fact, concluded that the USOE findings contradicted those of *The Great Debate*. This would mean that the USOE studies pointed to a meaning-emphasis as the advantageous approach. Yet this was not reported either. Indeed, most reviewers seemed to conclude that the 27 USOE studies found no method superior to any other. Superior results, if any, were attributed to the teacher. (1983 update, p. 6)

Also noteworthy is the fact that most of the so-called meaning-emphasis approaches focused on sight word recognition, not on reading whole texts and thereby developing sight vocabulary, reading strategies, and skills in the context of reading. In one analysis of the USOE data, a well-known European scholar concluded that the approaches that came closest to being "whole language" actually produced the best results (Grundin, 1985, p. 265).

In a 1988 critique of Chall's research synthesis in her *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (1967, updated 1983), Marie Carbo points out what Chall admitted in her original attempt to synthesize the results of the experimental research studies: many of them had serious design flaws (Chall, 1967, pp. 100-101; Carbo, 1988a). Carbo's further analysis of the data from 16 of 31 studies discussed by Chall reveals some additional flaws in Chall's own analysis and reporting of these results. In several ways, Chall tended to skew the data as being more favorable to phonics instruction than the data seem to warrant. Carbo (1988a) demonstrates that this criticism applies not only to the studies reviewed and to the conclusions drawn in Chall's original 1967 edition of *The Great Debate*, but also to the post-1967 studies that Chall discusses (Chall, 1983 update).

To try to resolve the debate that developed between Carbo and Chall, assessment expert Richard Turner decided to see what conclusions could be drawn if he considered only "the best evidence" from the research Chall considered. He rejected not only laboratory experiments, which inevitably distort the nature of the normal reading process, but also "patched-up program evaluations," which constituted the vast majority of articles cited by Chall and criticized by Carbo.

This left nine randomized field experiments that compared a systematic phonics approach with either an intrinsic phonics approach or a "no-phonics" approach, in which students were left to develop, over time, their own methods for figuring out sounds in unrecognized words. Turner suggests that the latter strategy would be characteristic of a whole language approach, but in practice most whole language teachers combine this strategy with various kinds of direct and indirect teaching of phonics (see Chapter 5). None of the studies compared a systematic phonics approach to reading instruction with a whole language approach to developing literacy.

What the studies did compare is systematic phonics with differing variants of a whole word approach. Turner hypothesized that any initial advantages one approach might have over the other would appear early in the primary grades and then disappear. The data generally supported this hypothesis, leading Turner to conclude as follows:

My overall conclusion from reviewing the randomized field studies is that systematic phonics falls into that vast category of weak instructional treatments with which education is perennially plagued. Systematic phonics appears to have a slight and early advantage over a basal-reader/whole-word approach as a method of beginning reading instruction. . . . However, this difference does not last long and has no clear meaning for the acquisition of literacy in the sense of enhancing vocabulary and improving comprehension. Moreover, learning theory offers little reason to believe that it should do so. (Turner, 1989, p. 283)

Turner concludes his analysis of the randomized field experiments by stating, "Perhaps it is time for reading experts to turn away from the debate over systematic phonics in search of more powerful instructional treatments that will influence the development of literacy in the middle grades and beyond" (p. 283).

Yes, indeed.

Misunderstanding and Invalid Research

When systematic phonics advocates have attempted to compare phonics or skills approaches with whole language classrooms, they have operated out of an apparent misunderstanding of whole language. This leads to invalid conclusions.

For example, the authors of *Becoming a Nation of Readers* wrote that in the United States, whole language approaches had produced results that were typically "indifferent" when compared with approaches typical in American classrooms—at least when measured by "performance on first- and second-grade standardized reading achievement tests" (R. C. Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 45). However, the reference supporting this statement is Bond and Dykstra's 1967 summary of the USOE studies, which were undertaken at least two decades before whole language burgeoned in the United States. (Also, see Grundin's differing conclusion: that the approaches most like whole language produced the *best* results; Grundin, 1985, p. 265.)

More recently, Stahl and Miller (1989) conducted a statistical meta-analysis ("quantitative research synthesis") of data from various studies in an attempt to compare the effects of differing approaches. Combining whole language and language experience as if they were essentially the same (even though these researchers seemed to know better), they concluded that "overall, whole language/language experience approaches are approximately equal in their effects" to basal reader/skills approaches, but with some exceptions: for example, they note that whole language/language experience approaches may be most effective for developing concepts about print, while more direct approaches might be better at helping students master word recognition skills (Stahl & Miller, 1989, p. 87). However, anything the research might have suggested



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about whole language is invalidated by the fact that it is lumped together with language experience. As Chapter 3 should have made clear, language experience is simply one kind of activity that may be included in classrooms reflecting a much broader whole language philosophy of learning and teaching. (For more detailed criticisms, see McGee & Lomax, 1990, and Schickendanz, 1990.)

The fact that these researchers could have drawn such invalid conclusions may stem, in part, from the fact that systematic phonics researchers and whole language researchers typically operate from very different underlying assumptions.


DIFFERING ASSUMPTIONS

When considering the differences between systematic phonics researchers and whole language researchers (and those who sympathetically summarize their respective research) it is important to take into account their underlying assumptions, because these assumptions guide how they set up research studies and interpret the results: what they look for, and what counts as evidence (see, for instance, Edelsky's 1990 critique of McKenna, Robinson, & Miller, 1990).

To begin with, judging by their research studies, systematic phonics researchers consider readers' performance on standardized tests of isolated skills (reading "achievement") to be accurate and adequate measures of reading; whole language researchers do not. Instead, the latter consider it critical to examine reading and writing growth together, along with other aspects of intellectual and affective growth; to assess reading and writing by observing, describing, and analyzing what students do with literacy daily, not via standardized tests of skills; and to use a variety of measures in formal research.

One corollary is this: systematic phonics researchers seem to believe that students must be able to demonstrate a skill in isolation from actual reading, in order to control that skill or make use of that knowledge during actual reading. Furthermore, they often have a part-to-whole concept of reading. For example, Vellutino (in an article that reflects serious misconceptions about whole language) writes approvingly that "phoneme awareness [awareness of the separate sounds in words] is believed to be a prerequisite for learning to map alphabetic symbols to sound, and alphabetic mapping is believed to be a prerequisite for learning to identify individual words and learning to read in general" (1991, p. 439). From experience and research, whole language educators assume that understanding of the parts (letter/sound relationships and words) develops more gradually but also more readily within the context of the whole—reading and rereading predictable and enjoyable texts, and writing by using invented spelling. They also see no need for skills to be mastered or demonstrated in isolation; indeed, they assume that an emphasis on skills detracts from the process of learning to read.

Another corollary is this: systematic phonics researchers seem to concern themselves with short-term performance on test scores (e.g., on tests of letter/sound knowledge in grade 1), without considering how such an emphasis might affect students' overall growth

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It is true that whole-language proponents generally favor subjective, holistic forms of assessment. Objective assessments are relied on selectively.

as readers and writers and literate individuals through the primary years and beyond. Whole language educators and researchers take the longer view.

Systematic phonics researchers seem to take *correlations* either as evidence of unproven cause-effect relationships, as mandates for educational intervention, or both. For example, research indicates that there is a demonstrable correlation between fluent word identification and comprehension among good readers (e.g., Stanovich, 1980, 1981, 1984; Adams, 1990a). This has led systematic phonics advocates and others to assume that readers cannot comprehend well unless they can identify words fluently, an assumption that is clearly disproven by decades of miscue research (K. S. Goodman & Y. M. Goodman, n. d.); odd as it may seem, readers who read haltingly and with many miscues often comprehend quite well. The correlation between fluent word identification and comprehension has also led part-to-whole-oriented researchers to assume that phonics must be taught early and perhaps intensively, to facilitate fluent reading and thus comprehension; this is part of Adams' argument (1990a). Supported by research on language acquisition and emergent literacy, whole language researchers reject not only the implicit assumption that the earlier children acquire phonics knowledge the better, but also the assumption that phonics must be systematically taught in order to generate fluent word reading and analysis. They are more concerned with the development of a wide array of literacy understandings, behaviors, and attitudes, on the assumption that the development of the whole of literacy is far more important in the long run.

Here's another example of phonics researchers using correlations as cause-effect relationships: Byrne and Fielding-Barnsley (1991) cite studies showing that phonemic awareness affects reading and spelling skills, then take as the starting point for their research the assumption that "It makes sense, therefore, to include instruction in phonemic organization in the early stages of the reading curriculum" (1991, p. 451). In other words, these researchers assume that because there's a correlation between phonemic awareness and reading and spelling skills, the earlier phonics is mastered, the better. Whole language researchers and educators note that this conclusion does not necessarily follow. Sooner is not necessarily better—at least not if other important learning is sacrificed.

Finally, systematic phonics researchers generally operate from a "stage theory" model of learning to read (Chall, 1983; Adams, 1990a; Stahl, 1992). What this means in practice is that they recognize the transactional nature of emergent literacy, up to and perhaps through kindergarten (Adams, 1990a; Chall, 1983). However, they seem to think that by grade 1, children must be explicitly taught to read; they can no longer be trusted to develop literacy by transacting with environmental print and books and by engaging in writing experiences, in a supportive environment. These researchers seem to trade in their transactional model of birth-through-kindergarten learning for a transmission model, starting in grade 1. At least, that's what one can infer from their insistence that by grade 1 (if not before), children must begin to be explicitly and systematically taught phonics. Whole language researchers assume that the constructivist nature of learning continues throughout our lives, whether or not we are taught by means compatible with how we learn most effectively.

Contrasting the underlying assumptions of systematic phonics researchers with

those of whole language researchers sets the stage for better understanding the research that supports whole language.

RESEARCH SUPPORTING A WHOLE LANGUAGE ALTERNATIVE

There is a world of difference between phonics and whole language. Even though it is often promoted as a method of teaching reading, phonics deals only with one cue system used to construct meanings from texts. At the opposite end of the spectrum, whole language is in effect a total (albeit evolving and incomplete) theory or philosophy of learning and teaching. Phonics and whole language aren't really different routes to the same goals. Nevertheless, whole language classrooms do offer ways of developing phonics knowledge that contrast with systematic phonics (see also Chapter 5).

There are basically three kinds of research supporting whole language learning and teaching: research on language acquisition, emergent literacy, the reading process, and learning itself, which gave rise to whole language practice in the first place; naturalistic research documenting the success of whole language with individual children and classes; and experimental research comparing whole language with more traditional alternatives in the classroom (for summaries of research studies, see Krashen, 1993; Stephens, 1991; Shapiro, 1990; Heald-Taylor, 1989; Tunnell & Jacobs, 1989; Rhodes & Shanklin, 1989; and Weaver, 1988). The first kind of research forms the basis for much of this book, while the second is much better described in a rich abundance of other books and articles (see bibliographies in Chapter 3). The third kind of research, research comparing one kind of program or classroom with another, is briefly discussed below. An excellent overview of the research base is provided in Diane Stephens' *Research on Whole Language: Support for a New Curriculum* (1991). Stephens describes many of the studies in some depth, particularly the less accessible ones. (See Figure 7.2 for fuller bibliographic information on these summaries of research.) Stephens and I have described some of these studies also in Chapter 6 of my *Understanding Whole Language* (1990a), earlier studies were described in the first edition of *Reading Process and Practice* (1988). Below I describe three of the studies in those volumes, updating the references; describe four more studies; and draw generalizations from the seven studies reviewed. Described in greatest detail are those that are richest in the selection of subjects, the length of the study, the collection of data, or (at least in one instance) the characterizations of contrasting kinds of classrooms.

Because phonics advocates typically measure progress by standardized test scores, I have deliberately chosen, for comparison, studies that included at least one standardized test among the assessment measures. However, this decision should not be construed as evidence that I think standardized tests are appropriate measures of literacy development.

The first study described is actually a summary of nine research studies on learning English as a second language. The other studies are described in an order reflecting the age of the children and grade of the classrooms discussed, with longitudinal studies described last.

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In the remaining 20 pages of Chapter 7, Weaver discusses 8 selected studies that she believes support the validity and efficacy of a whole language approach to early literacy. This material is readily available in libraries or through online sources. The final paragraph of the chapter appears to summarize Weaver's overall assessment of whole-language as a tool for teaching and offer some concession to reality:

"The moral of the story is that we should not expect whole language classrooms to immediately succeed in producing entire classrooms of children who can read, write, compute, and reason perfectly; but we can and do expect that whole language classrooms will generate continued learning and enhanced self-esteem and pleasure in learning. And if some learners still need more support or more time than one classroom teacher can provide, we should not be surprised."

- Goodman, K. S. (1989). Whole-language research: Foundations and development. *The Elementary School Journal*, 90, 208-221.
- Hall, N. (1987). *The emergence of literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Heald-Taylor, G. (1989). *The administrator's guide to whole language*. Chap. 8, "Whole language research: Key studies and reference literature." Katonah, NY: Richard C. Owen.
- Krashen, S. (1993). *The power of reading: Insights from the research*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.
- Rhodes, L. K., & Shanklin, N. L. (1989). *A research base for whole language*. Denver, CO: LINK.
- Shapiro, J. (1990). Research perspectives on whole language. In V. Froese (Ed.), *Whole language practice and theory* (pp. 313-356). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Stephens, D. (1991). *Research on whole language: Support for a new curriculum*. Katonah, NY: Richard C. Owen.
- Tunnell, M. O., & Jacobs, J. S. (1989). Using "real books": Research findings on literature based reading instruction. *The Reading Teacher*, 42, 470-477.
- Weaver, C., & Stephens, D. (1990). What does the research say? Research in support of whole-to-part. In Constance Weaver, *Understanding whole language* (pp. 125-141). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

FIGURE 7.2 References summarizing research on whole language (Note: The references with the most items on experimental studies are Krashen and the last four.)

W. Elley, 1991

- Elley, W. B. (1991). Acquiring literacy in a second language: The effect of book-based programs. *Language Learning*, 41(3), 375-411.

Elley reviews nine studies of the acquisition of English as a second language, most of which were undertaken in the South Pacific and Southeast Asia, including his own earlier study (Elley & Manguhbai, 1983). Typically these studies compared the results of programs based on structured systematic instruction with "book flood" programs, which exposed children to large numbers of high-interest story books. In other words, the studies compared the effects of a direct instruction approach with an indirect approach that might be characterized as "whole language" or "natural" language learning. These studies all involved elementary school students.

What I've considered the direct instruction approach typically involved principles articulated by structural linguists (e.g., Bloomfield, 1942) and audiolingual methodology: practice on a carefully sequenced set of grammatical structures, through imitation, repetition, and reinforcement. The book flood studies reflected typical whole language principles, and usually involved either sustained silent reading of an extensive number of picture books; the Shared Book Experience (Holdaway, 1979), including reading,