



## Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 31

Issue 1 *September/October* 1990

Article 7

10-1-1990

# Closing the Gap Between Theory and Practice: Teacher Beliefs, Instructional Decisions and Critical Thinking

Jon Shapiro

*University of British Columbia*

Donna Kilbey

*Grande Prairie College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons)

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Shapiro, J., & Kilbey, D. (1990). Closing the Gap Between Theory and Practice: Teacher Beliefs, Instructional Decisions and Critical Thinking. *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 31 (1). Retrieved from [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading\\_horizons/vol31/iss1/7](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol31/iss1/7)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Special Education and Literacy Studies at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).





# **Closing the Gap Between Theory and Practice: Teacher Beliefs, Instructional Decisions and Critical Thinking**

**Jon Shapiro  
Donna Kilbey**

*Before beginning first grade, Matthew was a child who just loved books. He could already read some familiar books and composed his own stories and poems. He read his compositions to anyone willing to listen, which included the family dog.*

*Matthew's first grade teacher noted that he had scored poorly on the readiness test administered at the end of his kindergarten year. He also appeared to her to have a short attention span and he was a messy printer. Matthew was assigned to the low reading group.*

*After two months of school, Matthew was waking up each morning with a stomach ache. He was persistently cranky and he was even wetting the bed on occasion. Matthew also stopped reading and writing his own stories at home.*

*Matthew's second grade teacher had no reading groups. She encouraged Matthew to choose books about dragons and dinosaurs, two of his favorite subjects. She encouraged him to write his own stories and*

*read them to his classmates and to her. Matthew's compositions often appeared in the school newspaper. Matthew loved going to school. In fact, weekends and holidays were a bit boring for him. He began to bring home library books and would spend many hours with a friend, composing stories on the family computer.*

## **Introduction**

Matthew's story has a touch of irony to it in that both of his teachers had graduated from the same teacher preparation program in the same year. In fact, they had many of the same professors for their reading/language arts courses. Their principal had allowed them to choose their own methods and materials. The first grade teacher chose one of the district-approved basal reading programs while the second grade teacher decided to implement an integrated reading-writing-thinking approach, common to the whole language philosophy.

While it is difficult to speculate why these two teachers chose divergent approaches to teaching literacy skills, it is important to understand factors which influence teachers' practices. The one factor which would seem to be most important is teachers' beliefs about the reading process.

Examining the relationship between instructional practices which teachers use and current theories of literacy development is also important. If beliefs inform behavior, action must be taken when discrepancies between the two exist or when beliefs are antithetical to what we know about children's language and cognitive development. Strategies must be devised to assist teachers to examine critically both their beliefs and instructional practices and decisions. While the movement to empower teachers (Fagan, 1989; Shannon, 1989) clearly implies that teachers play a part in determining their literacy methods and in selecting

materials, they must be accountable for these choices — accountable in the sense that they can provide justification which is based upon accurate knowledge of literacy development.

In discussing the gap between theory and practice we will present the relationship between the two. The "fit" between current theories of literacy development and the traditional basal reader approach will be shown to be inadequate. We will also address the role of critical thinking in transforming teachers' perspectives about the reading process and how they teach reading. This transformation leads to a call for a form of instruction, epitomized by many whole language programs, which is congruent with our new knowledge of literacy development.

### **Teacher beliefs and behavior**

Teachers are a diverse group. They differ in age, ethnic and cultural heritage, and they have had a multiplicity of experiences. Therefore it is not surprising that teachers also hold divergent expectations and beliefs about education. Teachers begin their careers with preconceptions about the role of the teacher. Teachers may hold one of two views of teaching (Campbell and O'Loughlin, 1988). The first is the mimetic or banking approach, whereby the teachers' job is to fill the empty vault with something of worth (knowledge). The second view is the transformative or midwife approach. Teachers who hold this view tend to see the learner as bringing something to the learning situation and it is the role of the teacher to 'give birth to this knowledge.' The majority of teachers tend to subscribe to the former belief. They "...hold the empiricist view that knowledge is reducible to objective facts; that teaching is the transmission of facts; and that learning is the accumulation of facts" (p. 57). Shannon (1989) presents a similar argument re-

garding teachers overreliance on basal reading programs. He argues that educators have reified commercial reading materials. That is, they hold the belief that the materials have some sort of scientific validity and that the materials with their scope and sequence of skills must be followed rather closely.

While most teachers hold a conventional view of reading instruction, diversity of views is apparent with the new attention being paid to whole language approaches (Newman, 1985; Froese, 1990). This diversity can be seen in views of the concept of reading readiness held by seven well-known American reading experts. These views ranged from a total rejection of the term itself to the inclusion of the traditional components of this concept first established in the 1925 National Society for the Study of Education's annual report (Wilson and Thrower, 1985).

It has been argued that in the teaching of beginning reading there is often a disparity between teachers' espoused beliefs about reading and their actual practices (Argyris and Schon, 1974; Davis, 1986). On the other hand, it has been reported that teachers actively formulate and reformulate their beliefs and adapt their instruction accordingly in the process of teaching (Borko, Shavelson and Stern, 1981). While it can not be denied that some teachers maintain congruence between their beliefs and instruction, Duffy (1982) maintains that the belief of the urgency to cover material and have a well-managed classroom is the actual driving force behind most teachers' instructional decision-making.

The picture regarding teachers' beliefs and practices is not yet clear. Research indicates that, at times, teachers' beliefs about reading or certain aspects such as voluntary

reading (Morrow, 1985) do influence their practice. However, it is also evident that classroom practices are strongly influenced by practical realities of classroom life, teachers' perceptions of administrative desires (Shannon, 1986), and commercial reading materials (Shannon, 1987). We believe that it is desirable to have congruence between teachers' beliefs and practices. If we are to foster this congruence, then teachers must be led to examine the assumptions underlying their beliefs, as well as the beliefs of others. Teachers must learn to question why they are using specific instructional practices and how these practices relate to current theories of literacy development. These two points are central to any transformation in reading instruction since there may be congruence between beliefs and instructional strategies, yet the type of instruction is still not desirable. This situation can occur when the beliefs are not accurate reflections of what we know about children's development of language and literacy. Thus congruence between beliefs and practice are not in themselves desirable. Teachers must move toward an understanding of the current knowledge concerning literacy acquisition and development.

### **Literacy theories and conventional Instruction**

Historically, theorists have focused on instructional versus developmental models of reading and skills-based and meaning-based approaches to reading instruction. Since the advent of the scientific management perspective of reading instruction in the early twentieth century (Shannon, 1989), instructional, skills-based models have held sway along with the continuation of the belief that reading instruction can be scientifically managed. That this view is still predominant is seen in the Commission on Reading's statement that "America will become a nation of readers when verified practice of the best teachers in the

best schools can be introduced throughout the country" (Anderson et al., 1985, p. 120).

It has been suggested that this model is "...based on the assumption that all children are at a fairly similar level of development..." (Morrow, 1989, p. 10). The major difficulties with this assumption are that 1) it gives no credence to current theories of language and intellectual development (Piaget and Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1981); 2) the goals of reading instruction are reduced to identifiable levels of reading competencies and; 3) as a result, the process of reading is fragmented into discrete skills. These theories, as well as current research, point to the fact that reading acquisition is the factor of the social environment of literacy development (Salinger, 1988). Holdaway (1979) has proposed that: Developmental learning is highly individual and non-competitive; it is short on teaching and long on learning; it is self-regulated rather than adult-regulated; it goes hand in hand with fulfillment of real life purposes; it emulates the behavior of people who model the skill in natural use (p. 14).

For teachers who wish to examine their beliefs and practices it is useful to ask whether conventional reading instruction, as exemplified in most basal reading programs, match Holdaway's views on developmental literacy learning.

### **Developmental learning**

With conventional reading programs ability grouping provides the typical framework for instruction. This form of grouping, however, tends to reduce the likelihood of individualization of instruction and a non-competitive atmosphere.

When students are grouped in this manner "...teachers tend to think about the group and not the individual student" (Shavelson and Stern, 1981, p. 475). A

study of four approaches to providing reading instruction found that in classrooms which utilized basal readers, no individual instruction was provided in reading, writing or enabling skills (Freeman and Freeman, 1987).

Although competition within and between groups may not be overtly promoted, it is often a by-product of ability grouping and teachers can unknowingly use subtle messages to confirm a child's status within the class. Hiebert (1983) found some teachers who openly differentiated between materials and classroom areas intended for high and low groups. Similar results were found by Grant and Rothenberg (1986) who concluded that "...there is a fundamental conflict between the practice of ability grouping and public schools' avowed goal of providing equal opportunity to all students" (p. 47).

It is also likely that the frequently found practice of marking workbooks and worksheets, which are typically designated as practice material, causes a subtle form of competition within groups as children compare their marks with others. It would seem that the practice of compulsory oral reading in front of the group also fosters a competitive environment in which there are "winners and losers."

The traditional practice of ability grouping and the competition which it tends to foster seems to be entrenched in conventional uses of basal reader programs. Indeed, some of these practices are often encouraged by the reading experts who devised the series and school district personnel responsible for the "reading curriculum." These aspects of programs need to be questioned because they appear to work against the first two tenets of developmental learning.



### **Short on teaching, long on learning**

Holdaway (1979) asserts that developmental learning emphasizes learning as opposed to teaching. Implied in this statement is support for the transformative approach to teaching. However, conventional approaches to the teaching of reading tend to promote the mimetic approach. In a comparative study of knowledge-driven and stimulus-driven reading programs, it was found that teachers using basal readers spent more than half of the reading period in teacher-directed activity in which they played the role of expert and the children were receivers of information (Evans and Carr, 1985). Another study which compared whole-language and conventional reading instruction classrooms characterized the interaction in the latter as "teacher-contingent" (Wilucki, 1984).

Literacy learning implies more than just the accumulation of skills. What appears to be of paramount importance is the ability to apply knowledge for "...specific purposes in specific contexts of use" (Scribner and Cole, 1981). Yet conventional reading instruction has been found to be content-centered rather than student-centered, with the emphases on word recognition and word analysis skills (Rupley and Logan, 1985).

### **Self-regulated rather than adult-regulated**

Conventional reading programs are regulated by teachers usually following explicit directions found in a basal reading series. Teachers guidebooks clearly spell out what is to be taught, in what sequence, and by what method. Little decision-making other than grouping and the pacing of lessons is left to the teacher. Certainly no decision-making is left to the child.

Shannon (1989) claims that students are the biggest losers in technically-controlled commercial materials. There is no learner self-regulation and "...students become individuals within the system only according to the rate at which they progress through the specified curriculum" (p. 94).

To some extent, teachers are also losers within the conventional approach. Since very few decisions are made by the teacher, they have become deskilled (Shannon, 1987). Skilled professionals make decisions which are integral to their work. Teachers who, because of the program they adhere to, do not make decisions about which material to use with different students and which instructional techniques to utilize at different times, are no longer professionals as far as their reading instruction is concerned (Shannon, 1989). Shannon goes on to claim that teachers become alienated from their reading programs.

### **Real life purposes**

While it can not be said that conventional reading instruction is purposeless, it is obvious that children do not perceive the true purposes of reading. In studies conducted in the United States (Johns and Ellis, 1976) and in Ireland (Cairney, 1988), children in basal reading programs did not perceive that the major purpose for reading was to construct meaning. Shapiro and White (1990) reported clear differences in perceptions of the purposes of reading among children in traditional and nontraditional reading programs. The former group perceived the function of reading primarily in utilitarian or job-related perspectives. The latter group perceived the function of reading from both enjoyment and knowledge acquisition frameworks.

It appears that with conventional reading instruction comes the perception that reading is a set of skills to be

acquired. Holdaway (1979) suggests that this view is self-defeating. He states that, "Unless they function in concert and are taught largely within meaningful contexts, the so-called basic skills constitute a parody of reading and writing" (p. 190).

The research on emergent literacy clearly indicates that children come to school knowing a great deal about reading and writing and the purposes of these acts (Shapiro, 1990). It is clear that most young children use simplistic forms of reading and writing in purposeful ways. We may wish to question whether conventional forms of reading instruction distort children's perceptions.

### **Naturalistic modeling**

How do young children come to know so much about literacy before they come to school? They learn by observing significant individuals using literacy for real-life purposes. It has been argued that instructional practices should build, not only on children's knowledge but, on the manner in which they have learned prior to school entry (Shapiro and Doiron, 1987).

Children should read material written in natural language. Research indicates that written language which is familiar to the child promotes comprehension (Simons and Ammon, 1987). Children should also hear stories and much oral language since these have been shown to increase vocabulary (Elley, 1989) and mediate writing ability (Dyson, 1983). Teachers should be seen using print in purposeful ways so that their students come to fully understand and appreciate the value of written language. Teale (1982) proposes that the modeling done by teachers assists children in understanding the functions, purposes, and conventions

of print. More importantly, the modeling is a motivating force.

Conventional reading instruction can create barriers to naturalistic learning. The text of beginning reading material often contains stilted language. Written feedback related to children's workbook or worksheet assignments frequently consists of brief remarks as opposed to well-written, constructive comments. In many conventional classrooms, less time is spent reading good literature to children due to pressures related to covering what is seen as the necessary components of the "reading curriculum." Children receiving conventional reading instruction may, in fact, have little opportunity to see literacy modeled in purposeful ways.

### **Critical thinking and perspective transformation**

Questions regarding how conventional reading instruction matches views of literacy learning as a developmental process lead to doubts as to whether this form of instruction is congruent with theories we believe in. Perhaps the most challenging job facing administrators and teacher educators is that of assisting teachers in critically examining these discrepancies between practice and theory and to facilitate the necessary changes. While this may seem to be a formidable task, it is a necessary one. If teachers are to regain professionalism in the teaching of reading, they must regain some of the responsibilities for classroom decision-making.

Critical thinking skills must be an essential component of a teacher's repertoire. Teachers have a professional responsibility to reflect on their practices, yet they are often so consumed by the mechanics of their position that they neglect to examine their practices, or refuse to examine them systematically. Goodman argues that "...children

receive the best education when teachers develop what Dewey referred to as the habit of reflection, that is, the ability to consistently question the existing education found in our schools and society and explore viable alternatives" (1986, p. 183).

Critical thinking, however, entails more than just reflecting on one's beliefs and practices. It is synonymous with emancipatory learning, a three-step process in which learners first become aware of the situation they are in, then become aware of the forces that brought them to that situation, and complete the process by taking action to change some aspect of the situation (Brookfield, 1987, p. 12). Thus, critical thinking is both reflection and action. Eventually it leads to empowerment because it is seen as a force "which frees people from...institutional...forces that prevent them from seeing new direction..." (Apps, 1985, p. 151).

It is important to note that critical thinking occurs best in a supportive environment. Critical thinking involves personal and professional risk-taking. It can be a very discomfoting process because our beliefs are often interwoven with our self-concept. When a teacher's beliefs are challenged, especially by an external agent, the teacher's self-perception as an educator is at risk. Administrators and teacher educators must challenge teachers to think critically, but they are responsible for ensuring that this occurs in an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. Teachers must know that their experience and knowledge is valued. Ultimately they must be encouraged to use that knowledge and experience to form new perspectives about their reading instruction.

Critical thinking alone will not necessarily lead to sound instructional practices in reading. However, this type of

introspection is a necessary first step in changing reading practices (Shapiro, 1979). Without it, reading instructional practices may remain static.

## Summary

While there are many factors which influence a teacher's reading instructional practices, their beliefs about reading can shape their behavior. When these behaviors and beliefs are at odds with accepted theories of child language learning and development intervention should occur.

There appear to be some discrepancies between conventional forms of reading instruction, involving basal readers, and current theories of literacy development. If this is so, then teachers, administrators and teacher educators have a professional responsibility to consider change and to challenge us to think critically about our professional practices. Strategies for intervention need to be developed so that self-examination can occur in a risk-free, supportive environment. Critically examining our practices may prevent us from reducing reading instruction to little more than technical rationality. Conventional reading programs need to be modified to bring them into line with current views of literacy goals and research (Barr, 1989). It is apparent that programs which fall under the "whole language umbrella" are more consistent with these views.

## References

- Anderson, R.C., Hiebert, E.H., Scott, J.A., & Wilkinson, I.A.G. (1985). *Becoming a nation of readers*. Washington: National Institute of Education.
- Apps, J.W. (1985). *Improving practice in continuing education: Modern approaches for understanding the field and determining priorities*. San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Argyris, D., & Schon, D. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Barr, R., & Sadow, M.W. (1989). Influence of basal programs on fourth-grade reading instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 24, 45-71.

- Borko, H., Shavelson, R., & Stern, P. (1981). Teachers' decisions in the planning of reading instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 16, 449-466.
- Brookfield, S.D. (1987). *Developing critical thinkers*. San Francisco CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Cairney, T.H. (1988). The purpose of basals: What children think. *The Reading Teacher*, 41, 420-429.
- Campbell, M., & O'Loughlin, M. (1988). Teacher preparation, teacher empowerment, and reflective inquiry: A critical reflection. *Education and Society*, 6, 54-70.
- Davis, R. (1986). Teacher theories of beginning reading: An exploratory study. *Reading-Canada-Lecture*, 4, 263-268.
- Dyson, A.H. (1983). The role of oral language in early writing processes. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 17, 1-30.
- Duffy, G. (1982). Response to Borko, Shavelson and Stern: There's more to instructional decision-making in reading than the "empty-classroom." *Reading Research Quarterly*, 17, 295-300.
- Elley, W.B. (1989). Vocabulary acquisition from listening to stories. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 24, 174-187.
- Evans, M., & Carr, T. (1985). Cognitive abilities, conditions of learning, and the early development of reading skill. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 20, 327-349.
- Fagan, W.T. (1989). Empowering students: empowered teachers. *The Reading Teacher*, 42, 572-579.
- Freeman, R., & Freeman, G. (1987). Reading acquisition: A comparison of four approaches to reading instruction. *Reading Psychology*, 8, 257-272.
- Froese, V. (Ed.) (1990). *Whole language practice and theory*. Scarborough ONT: Prentice-Hall Canada.
- Goodman, J. (1986). Critical approach to curriculum design: A descriptive account. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 16, 181-203.
- Grant, L., & Rothenberg, J. (1986). The social enhancement of ability differences: Teacher-student interactions in first-and second-grade reading groups. *The Elementary School Journal*, 87, 28-48.
- Hiebert, E.H. (1983). An examination of ability grouping for reading instruction. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 28, 231-254.
- Holdaway, D. (1979). *The foundations of literacy*. Gosford, New South Wales: Ashton-Scholastic.
- Johns, J.L., & Ellis, D.W. (1976). Reading: Children tell it like it is. *Reading World*, 16, 115-128.
- Morrow, L.M. (1985). Attitudes of teachers, principals and parents toward promoting voluntary reading in the elementary school. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 25, 116-130.
- Morrow, L.M. (1989). *Literacy development in the early years*. Scarborough ONT: Prentice-Hall Canada.
- Newman, J.M. (Ed.) (1985). *Whole language - theory in use*. Portsmouth NH: Heinemann.
- Piaget, J., & Inhelder, B. (1969). *The psychology of the child*. New York: Basic Books.

- Rupley, W., & Logan, J. (1985). Elementary teachers' beliefs about reading and knowledge of reading content: Relationships to decisions about reading outcomes. *Reading Psychology, 6*, 145-156.
- Salinger, T. (1988). *Language arts and literacy for young children*. Columbus OH: Merrill.
- Scribner, S., & Cole, M. (1981). *The psychology of literacy*. Cambridge MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Shannon, P. (1986). Teachers' and administrators' thoughts on changes in reading instruction with a merit pay program based on test scores. *Reading Research Quarterly, 21*, 20-35.
- Shannon, P. (1987). Commercial reading materials, a technological ideology, and the deskilling of teachers. *The Elementary School Journal, 87*.
- Shannon, P. (1989). *Broken promises*. Cambridge MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Shapiro, J. (1979). Developing an awareness of attitudes. In J. Shapiro (Ed.), *Using literature and poetry affectively*, 2-7. Newark DE: International Reading Association.
- Shapiro, J., & Doron, R. (1987). Literacy environments: Bridging the gap between home and school. *Childhood Education, 63*, 262-269.
- Shapiro, J., & White, W. (1990). Attitudes and perceptions toward reading in traditional and nontraditional reading programs. *Reading Research and Instruction*. (In press).
- Shapiro, J. (1990). Research perspectives on whole-language. In V. Froese (Ed.), *Whole language practice and theory*, 269-305. Scarborough ONT: Prentice-Hall Canada.
- Shavelson, R., & Stern, P. (1981). Research on teachers' pedagogical thoughts, judgments, decisions and behavior. *Review of Educational Research, 51*, 455-498.
- Simons, H.D.A., & Ammons, P.R. (1987). *The language of beginning reading texts: Final report*. National Council of Teachers of English Research Foundation.
- Teale, W.H. (1982). Toward a theory of how children learn to read and write naturally. *Language Arts, 59*, 555-570.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1981). The genesis of higher mental functions. In J.J. Wertch (Ed.), *The concept of activity*. White Plains NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Wilson, L.C., & Thrower, J. (1985). Early childhood reading educators' perceptions of reading readiness. *Reading Research and Instruction, 25*, 21-33.
- Wilucki, B.M. (1984). *The impact of teachers' orientation to literacy on children's developing concepts of written language in kindergarten*. National Council of Teachers of English Research Foundation.

*Jon Shapiro is Coordinator of Reading Education at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Donna Kilbey is a faculty member in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Grande Prairie College, in Grande Prairie, Alberta, Canada.*