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# Transitions in Reading Instruction: Handling Contradictions in Beliefs and Practice

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# **Transitions in Reading Instruction: Handling Contradictions in Beliefs and Practice**

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Martha Combs**

Reconciling whole language philosophy with traditional classroom reading instruction requires redefining beliefs about reading processes that, for most of us, are deeply embedded in years of basal reading instruction. Such redefining has the potential of creating conflicts between curricular beliefs and instructional practices. Whole language and basal skills instruction, according to Goodman (1989), are contradictory and incompatible practices. In contrast, Hemysfeld (1989) suggests that it is appropriate to combine the best aspects of skills instruction and whole language into one approach. While contradictions may exist initially, perhaps such contradictions will resolve themselves as educators redefine professional beliefs.

In support of others who are in transition, we would like to share experiences of two first grade teachers, Nancy and Sandra, who were beginning to make a transition from basal reading to a more holistic approach. Nancy and Sandra each discovered that transition is a slow process and that contradictions in beliefs and practice are a very real part of the transition.

## **A little background on Nancy and Sandra**

Both Nancy and Sandra came from traditional preservice programs, had student teaching experiences which emphasized a basal reading skills program approach and have taught for six and five years respectively. They are employed in different school systems; however, the adopted basal reading programs are the reading curriculum in both districts. During the year prior to the changes described, both teachers enrolled in graduate courses in reading/language arts at different universities and were introduced to whole language philosophy.

At school Nancy was allowed to make some changes in her instruction, but her principal assumed that she would continue to use basal materials in some manner. He expressed concern for children learning "the skills" and for the money that he expended for materials. Sandra's principal expressed similar concerns. Her school system, however, mandated at least three days of basal instruction per week.

## **Nancy's transition**

Following two and one-half months of basal readiness letter books combined with language experience, Nancy decided not to move into the preprimers as she had always done in the past. While she was deciding what to do about reading groups, she instituted a form of individualized reading. Using picture books and easy to read books that were leveled from very easy to hard, the children, with Nancy's guidance, chose books to read. They practiced reading the book by themselves, with a partner from their class, with a sixth grade partner, with the teacher, and with their parents until they felt confident to read the book aloud to the class. As Nancy made other changes in her program, time for individual reading remained. At the time, Nancy did

not consider this approach as a viable alternative to her basal groups.

In lieu of basal instruction, Nancy decided to alternate weekly between the use of 1) big books, and 2) content language experience (a combination of reading easy informational books and language experience stories). Even though a basal series had been adopted by her district, Nancy chose not to use those materials. She was, however, required to give the end of level tests that would be placed in cumulative folders.

During big book lessons, children were called to reading by table groups, so that the lesson was repeated three times. Nancy felt that the small groups enhanced interaction and attention. Lessons usually began with predictions using the title and pictures; as Nancy read each page aloud, she encouraged children to discuss story events and make new predictions. Nancy would also call attention to such things as word or letter patterns and new vocabulary words. The group then reread the story with Nancy. The reading was followed by a worksheet based upon the story and reinforcing a skill emphasized during the discussion.

Over the course of the week, the children participated in repeated readings, identified skill elements found in the stories, completed follow-up activities, and tape recorded themselves reading. Nancy commented that the first reading seemed tedious, but she did not change this routine.

Content language experience lessons were organized around four or five topics each week for which Nancy could find a variety of books, such as space, famous people, sports, wild animals, or transportation. On Monday, after selecting a topic, the children would choose a book to start

reading. Then they would informally share their books with each other. During the week of study, the groups would alternate meeting days with Nancy. Children discussed what they had learned, shared ideas they had written down, and dictated ideas they thought were important to remember. These dictated stories could be reread during future group times or independently. During the week the children also read a number of different books about their topic. Books were checked out to be read and shared at home. While Nancy met with one group of children, other groups were completing seatwork, listening to "skill" tapes and completing worksheets, or doing Workshop Way activities. Children were free to interact during this time, assisting each other.

The morning routine in Nancy's room began with process writing time. During writing children selected their own topics, wrote and often collaborated on stories. Nancy would conference with children. The writing time ended with a few children sharing their pieces at an "author's chair." After reading and responding to questions and comments about their stories, the authors would award a "listening ear" to the best listener. Authors also joined the "author's club" or added another star on the chart by their names for sharing.

Following writing, children were directed to a daily mystery word, sight words that Nancy believed needed to be learned. On 3x5 cards, children copied the word and a sentence, either the one on the board or their own, drew a picture on the reverse side of the card, and filed the card in a box with other mystery words. These cards were often referred to during spelling or writing.

Next came the assigning of seat work to be completed while Nancy met with reading groups. The seatwork often was a combination of work with spelling words, phonics

workbook pages, teacher-made practice pages for a skill discussed in reading group or in a minilesson, a follow-up activity to a language experience story, a math workbook page, or Workshop Way activities. Later in the year, the children received writing tablets for copying work from the board.

Skill teaching, such as phonics or structural analysis, was also completed as a whole group in minilessons. Along with skill knowledge, children were encouraged to think strategically about the skill knowledge that Nancy was presenting. There were usually follow-up activities on other days to reinforce the lesson. The content for these lessons came from what Nancy's observations during reading and writing times.

The afternoon included a spelling program in which children selected their own words and practiced with a partner, independent reading, math, or story times, and special classes, such as music, art or physical education. At the end of the day the children would mark their own behavior sheet by either circling a happy or sad face for that day.

### **Sandra's Transition**

Because of her school district's mandate of basal instruction three days per week, Sandra decided to use multiple copies of children's literature on the other two days. Initially she chose Tuesdays and Thursdays for literature. On the other three days she conducted her reading groups as she had always done, at least in the beginning of her transition.

On basal days, Sandra moved from the process writing period into an explanation of seatwork activities, which included a variety of reading and math worksheets, basal

workbook pages, and handwriting. A literature activity related to each group's book was also explained along with reminders about other classroom choices. In these sessions children were grouped by learning modalities. In these groups Sandra used a combination of story and vocabulary introductions, silent and oral reading, discussion of stories, skill instruction and explanations of workbook pages.

In preparation for the literature groups, Sandra selected four books that she thought her children would enjoy and for which she could get enough copies. For a period of four weeks children would rotate through these books, but in the order they chose. The week before the literature groups met, Sandra read all of the books aloud. On Friday, the children would tell her their choice for the first rotation. Sandra also developed five different extension activities for each book, one for each day of the week. These usually tended to be open ended activities, encouraging creativity and expression.

On Tuesdays, Sandra would introduce the children to the author of the book with interesting tidbits that she had found. Before reading, she would present a chart of vocabulary words, in story context, that she felt were necessary to discuss ahead of time. Then Sandra would read the story aloud again, with the children following along in their own books. The story would be discussed, emphasizing the parts the children enjoyed most and any questions they had about the story, including vocabulary. After the first reading, the book would be repeated with children reading along with Sandra whenever they could. If the group was enthusiastic and time permitted, the reading might be repeated several times. Finally, the children would act out favorite parts or become one of the characters in a new version.

On Thursdays, the second meeting of the literature group, the children would participate in repeated readings and some individual reading of favorite parts. During this group time, Sandra often called attention to certain aspects of the book that she wanted students to notice, such as special words, interesting patterns or how illustrations related to text. As the year progressed, these discussions were built more upon what students noticed in the book.

Over time, the children expressed reluctance to return to the basal stories so Sandra began to make some modifications in both literature and basal groups. In the literature groups, Sandra began to realize that no matter how carefully she selected the vocabulary words, they never seemed to be appropriate for all children. So she encouraged children to select five words from the story that they found interesting or wanted to learn. These words were placed in the child's word book.

Sandra also discovered that after several rotations through the set of four books, the children were very familiar with the stories and were suggesting new activities to extend the books. She learned that children often thought of better extensions than she did; certainly they were more personal.

During the basal lessons, Sandra began to find that students already were familiar with skills she was directed to introduce. Sandra believed that the combination of writing and wide reading was definitely helping. Realizing that students didn't need all of what the basals suggested, she began to alter lessons drastically, focusing on comprehension of the better stories and using the workbook pages less and less. Along with this change, she began to alter morning seatwork into more open ended activities that would allow



children more time for exploration. But she was never allowed to completely give up the basal program — and perhaps she wasn't ready to.

During the afternoon, Sandra's students were read to, completed math lessons, did independent reading (often partner reading in one of the four literature group books), and were involved in units or other special activities. Children read a wide variety of texts in the unit activities. Sandra commented on how much easier it seemed to be to bring books into the afternoons than the mornings.

### **Contradictions come with transitions**

Fullan (1982) suggests that changes in classroom instruction involve a) use of new and revised materials, b) use of new teaching approaches, and c) alteration of beliefs. We will use this as a framework for reflecting on how Nancy and Sandra began to make changes in their classrooms and to consider the question of contradictory practices and beliefs during times of transition.

*Use of new and revised materials.* Both Nancy and Sandra incorporated new materials (children's literature and some follow-up or extension activities) into their reading instruction but in different ways. As they did this, they still retained some of the old materials. While initiating use of big books, information books, and language experience, Nancy still retained many worksheet-type activities that had previously been a part of her reading program. For the most part, Sandra seemed to separate the literature groups from other parts of the day. She did not bring old materials into these groups, but did retain them in most other parts of the morning.

These teachers come out of a basal tradition where change of curriculum is often equated with a change of materials, but not necessarily a change in beliefs or behaviors. In some school districts, it is done every five years or so as new state adoptions take place. Even when the new materials come, we often hold on to the old because it is familiar and comfortable. As the new materials become more familiar, we are better able to make judgments about the relevance or effectiveness of such materials.

Were the materials used by Sandra and Nancy incompatible or contradictory? Yes, they were. It seems, however, that part of the transition from basal to literature may involve a period of time when the materials we use are incompatible and contradictory as we are learning. However, as Nancy and Sandra illustrate, over time we can re-examine our ideas about contrived skill materials as we learn the power and potential of authentic materials.

Some impacts of the contradictions were easier to see than others. Nancy sensed that the big book lessons were not as effective as the content language experience lessons and she was initially defensive about them. Over time, she began verbalizing concerns about the big book lessons, acknowledging that a change was needed but she still wasn't sure what was wrong. Sandra could not elect to end basal instruction altogether, but she could begin to modify it to make it more consistent with the literature groups. Even though she was modifying her materials, Sandra still retained some old materials, such as workbooks and morning seatwork, for which she did not seem to see a new alternative. The process of change followed by the two teachers is summarized in Figures 1 and 2.

**Figure 1**  
**Nancy's Transition**

Basal Readiness Books with LEA

- OCT/NOV
  - decision not to use basal preprimers
  - independent & partner reading (while deciding alternative approach)
  - New approaches (alternating weeks)

- NOV/DEC
  - big book units (3 groups)

Day 1

predict  
 teacher read aloud  
 discuss  
 attention to skills  
 choral read  
 worksheets

Day 2/3

reread  
 attention to skills  
 worksheets  
 taped story

- content language experience (4-5 groups)

Day 1

select from 4-5 topics  
 select book  
 read independently or with partner  
 take book home

Day 2/3

share/discuss  
 dictate LEA  
 exchange books  
 take books home  
 write responses

Day 3/4

share/discuss  
 add to LEA  
 reread LEA  
 write ideas

- FEB/MAR
  - Add whole group minilessons for phonics and structural analysis. Emphasize strategies.

*Note: The chart reflects only major changes in reading instruction.*

**Figure 2**  
**Sandra's Transition**

SEPT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• basal groups (3 days) (district mandate)</li> </ul>																		
	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center; width: 33%;"><u>Day 1</u></td> <td style="text-align: center; width: 33%;"><u>Day 2</u></td> <td style="text-align: center; width: 33%;"><u>Day 3</u></td> </tr> <tr> <td>introduce story</td> <td>oral reading</td> <td>skill work</td> </tr> <tr> <td>introduce vocabulary</td> <td>skill work</td> <td>work book</td> </tr> <tr> <td>silent reading</td> <td>workbook</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>discussion</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>workbook</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	<u>Day 1</u>	<u>Day 2</u>	<u>Day 3</u>	introduce story	oral reading	skill work	introduce vocabulary	skill work	work book	silent reading	workbook		discussion			workbook		
<u>Day 1</u>	<u>Day 2</u>	<u>Day 3</u>																	
introduce story	oral reading	skill work																	
introduce vocabulary	skill work	work book																	
silent reading	workbook																		
discussion																			
workbook																			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• literature groups (2 days)</li> <li>(4 books - 4 groups, rotate weekly for 1 month)</li> </ul>																		
	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center; width: 50%;"><u>Day 1</u></td> <td style="text-align: center; width: 50%;"><u>Day 2</u></td> </tr> <tr> <td>introduce vocabulary</td> <td>choral reading</td> </tr> <tr> <td>read aloud</td> <td>reread favorite parts</td> </tr> <tr> <td>discuss favorite parts</td> <td>focus on particular aspects</td> </tr> <tr> <td>choral reading</td> <td style="padding-left: 20px;">of book</td> </tr> <tr> <td>acting out parts</td> <td>discuss author</td> </tr> <tr> <td>responsive activity</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	<u>Day 1</u>	<u>Day 2</u>	introduce vocabulary	choral reading	read aloud	reread favorite parts	discuss favorite parts	focus on particular aspects	choral reading	of book	acting out parts	discuss author	responsive activity					
<u>Day 1</u>	<u>Day 2</u>																		
introduce vocabulary	choral reading																		
read aloud	reread favorite parts																		
discuss favorite parts	focus on particular aspects																		
choral reading	of book																		
acting out parts	discuss author																		
responsive activity																			
OCT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• after several rotations students begin suggesting activities</li> </ul>																		
NOV	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• replace vocabulary introduction with personalized vocabulary activities</li> </ul>																		
JAN/FEB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• notice early skill acquisition</li> <li>• reduce isolated skill instruction</li> <li>• emphasize personal response</li> <li>• replace some workbook pages with open-ended activities</li> </ul>																		
MARCH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• become more selective about stories</li> <li>• some multiple copies of literature are by student authors</li> </ul>																		

*Note: The chart reflects only major changes in reading instruction.*

*Use of new teaching approaches.* For at least a portion of the school day, both Nancy and Sandra incorporated new teaching approaches, while maintaining the former approaches. Nancy's content language experience groups led her in new directions for the use of information books, open discussions, using writing as a way of responding to books, and a new teacher behavior for less directed reading groups. Nancy did not use these same behaviors in her big book groups where she was much more directed and used worksheets to isolate and check skill knowledge. She sensed that there was a difference between the two groups, but could not specifically identify what it was.

Except for her initial attempts to preteach vocabulary in stories, the approach that Sandra took in the literature groups was dramatically different than her typical basal teaching behavior. She behaved as if basal and literature groups served different functions. However, Sandra's basal group behavior was modified over the course of the year as she watched the children demonstrate knowledge of reading processes before the basal introduced the skill.

For both Nancy and Sandra some new behaviors were carried over to other parts of the day. Nancy moved into a more child-directed spelling approach. Sandra's afternoon incorporated a great deal of literature into units of study and she was being trained for Math Their Way, a process approach. Both teachers devoted time each morning to process writing.

Did Nancy and Sandra display incompatible and contradictory teaching behaviors? Yes, they did, but over the course of the year they both began to alter those behaviors. While at the end of the year all of the contradictions were not resolved, both Nancy and Sandra had learned to take some

of their cues from their children and from their intuition about what felt right.

Sensing that our behaviors may not be appropriate can be a long and drawn out process for some of us. We are not used to trusting ourselves. Both Nancy and Sandra needed time to grow into their new approaches, see how they felt, and then begin to reflect. Like materials, some behaviors were more obvious, others were very subtle and remained unchanged at the end of the year.

*Alteration of beliefs.* Redefining some of their beliefs initially led both Nancy and Sandra to begin making changes in classroom instruction which continued throughout the year. Both began with a global direction, but had difficulties with the details involved in the redefining that Goodman (1989) suggested must take place. They both seemed to focus on the most obvious at first—a need for new materials. Even though both Nancy and Sandra embraced holistic principles they continued some incompatible practices, such as isolated skill instruction. They seemed to be unable to recognize the contradictions between their espoused beliefs and some of their classroom practices. Even at the end of a year, there were still contradictions between beliefs, materials, and approaches that each teacher could not reconcile on her own.

The sheer number of changes may have actually slowed down Nancy's transition. There were times when Nancy felt overwhelmed with all that was happening in her classroom. Nancy had replaced most all of the traditional landmarks of the morning in a primary classroom with unfamiliar activities. While Sandra experimented with literature, she was still able to tell herself that she was teaching the "skills." This issue — "skills" — may very well be the most

difficult aspect of our histories to alter. Nancy had given up the security of basal groups, but did not give up teaching "skills" during that school year. Both teachers needed time to reconcile this issue for themselves.

## Conclusion

We believe that the experiences of teachers like Nancy and Sandra suggest that while teachers are in transition from basals to more holistic approaches, we should expect that some incompatible and contradictory elements will exist. Unlike Hemysfeld (1989), we do not suggest that the strengths of basals skills and whole language be combined into one approach. What we do suggest is acceptance of the co-existence of contradictory beliefs and practices as natural for a period of time while teachers re-educate themselves about new approaches, materials, and beliefs. Co-existence may mean periods of confusion and uncertainty, but reassurance comes from teachers like Nancy and Sandra, who demonstrate that when we begin to tune into ourselves and our children, new directions slowly become clearer.

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