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These Things I Know

BY MARY NAVARRE
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These things I know after 40 years of teaching reading to children, as well as teaching methods in teaching reading to preservice and inservice teachers.

- * Some children take to reading like magic. They get it with little effort on their part. One day, they just start reading.
- * Some children find the puzzle of reading nearly impossible. In spite of the best efforts of the best teachers, in spite of their own desire, motivation and keen intelligence, it is a daunting and difficult task.
- * Most children, with hard work, good teaching and faith in the possibility, eventually work out the meaning of those arbitrary squiggles on the page and—Lo!—they begin slowly, but surely to read.
- * Most teachers can use any method and help most children learn to read.
- * A few teachers can use any method and impede the effort of children in learning to read.
- * The teacher, not the method, is the most important variable in the success of learning to read.
- * For decades beyond decades, reading theorists have argued about whether phonics first or whole words is the best way to begin reading instruction.
- * To use phonics to the exclusion of meaningful words in context is a tedious method that would sour any self-respecting –6-year-old on the enterprise of learning to read.
- * To *not* use phonics as a tip-off to the pronunciation of thousands of words by associating sounds and letters (phonemes to graphemes) is to consign the young learner the horrific task of memorizing tens of thousands of words. It is to treat the alphabetic English language like an ideographic Chinese language. It is not a very smart thing to do.
- * Successful teachers ignore the latest fads and teach both phonics and whole words in and out of context all the time, every day and every way and give kids oodles of practice just reading and reading and reading interesting stuff.
- * Regrettably, the latest blunder of those who finance education is to conclude that since we cannot

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really measure what counts in our schools, we will only count what we *can* measure. This has had a detrimental effect on teaching literacy, which is best built on creativity and used authentically—neither of which can be measured by paper and pencil tests that are graded by machines.

- * Knowing how to read doesn't make people good or smart. It opens the doors of opportunity to the possibilities of the human imagination and the fulfillment of the human spirit.

It is one of the most important jobs anyone can do. It has been a rewarding way to spend my adult life.

Less Is More, If It's Done Well

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In an era in American culture where **More, More, More** seems to be the optimum word, I want to suggest that *more*, particularly in terms of literacy education may not be the right choice. Perhaps the better answer in literacy education is for teachers and students to do less and do it extremely well. In the essay that follows I will provide two examples of how *less is more* for students *if it's done well*.

Comprehension is an extremely hot topic in classrooms today. Books such as *Mosaic of Thought* (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997), *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding* (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000), *Guided Comprehension: A Teaching Model for Grades 3-8* (McLaughlin & Allen, 2002), and *Reading with Meaning: Teaching Comprehension in the Primary Grades* (Miller, 2002) provide teachers with many, many ideas, lessons, and recipes for helping students develop a rich array of comprehension strategies. Yet as Pressley and Block suggest in *Comprehension Instruction: Research-Based Best Practices* (2002), there are a small core of "well-validated comprehension strategies" (p. 390), that good readers repeatedly report using. These core comprehension strategies include using prior knowledge when reading text, using imagery, setting purposes for reading, self-questioning during reading, determining cause and effects, and summarizing. Why not teach readers beginning in the primary grades and continuing on through the elementary grades

this core group of strategies and teach them very well rather than teach students lists that often number as high as 20 to 30 strategies. I have personally seen many of these lists in classrooms in our state. I have observed that when teachers begin to teach more strategies, they merely mention or expose students rather than teaching for automaticity and ownership of the strategies. Pressley and Block both strongly advocate explicit strategy instruction that begins with modeling and direct explanation of what the teacher is doing with text so that students know why and how to effectively use strategies. They also advocate for the instructional process to then follow the gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) where students take over responsibility for using these strategies until they can do them automatically and effectively. Pressley and Block also suggest that teachers need to help students learn to coordinate the use of these strategies so that they can be used as needed when engaging with text. One final point needs to be made clear when we talk about

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