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Reading in Michigan

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I have been in education long enough to see reading instructional philosophies and methods come and go several times. Until the last third of the twentieth century, reading was defined as decoding. Instruction included the scripted approach of the basal reader teacher's manual and the innovative pretest-instruction-posttest design. Recognition that reading might be more than decoding, that reading meant comprehending the text, demanded that we use material from which readers could construct meaning. This led to revisions in the structure of basal readers and more meaningful selections. An even more radical response was the literature approach to teaching reading using trade books. Some teachers interpreted the "constructing meaning" definition of reading as a mandate to ignore teaching the strategies that lead to independence in decoding. Fortunately, most knowledgeable teachers never abandoned the use of a broad range of teaching approaches that met the needs of the many individuals who were learning to read in supportive environments. Currently, in response to unrealistic measures of student performance and over-reliance on test results that misrepresent student achievement, many failed curricula are being recycled and foisted upon educators who do not remember that it is teaching ability that makes the difference to learners, not the program adopted by the school district.

Many years ago I heard John Manning of the University of Minnesota, a past president of the International Reading Association, say that the most effective teachers were those who had the most extensive knowledge base. My experience has confirmed that claim. I believe that teachers whose work falls into the "best practice" category are those who have invested time and energy to become as well-versed and competent as possible. They are able to combine their

knowledge of the literacy process with their knowledge of child development to offer their students the most supportive and appropriate range of experiences to promote literacy achievement. I support the view that knowledge is constructed by learners, and that concepts discovered in the course of learning are salient to students. Salient concepts are more easily remembered. Therefore, the current return to failed prescriptive teaching appears to me to be counterproductive.

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Reading and writing are complex cognitive processes. For learners to succeed, their teachers must understand the process. The reality is that the components of the reading process are easy to measure and many children who are able to succeed on written tests of specific components are still unable to derive the essential ideas in the printed material. Concepts that cannot be comprehended, cannot be remembered. What I am referring to here are the higher level thinking skills so necessary to achievement in the subject areas and so difficult to measure on the assessments in use today. Teachers are being forced to design their curricula around the tests rather than using their precious instructional time to teach their students to become independent thinkers and problem solvers. The legislative mandates and the state and district implementation of these mandates are distorting the education process. There has been a reversion to an emphasis at the word component level rather than at the concept level—on the decontextualized fragments rather than on the richly contextualized meaning.

Failure to include critical literacy in the curricula across the educational spectrum limits students' ability to think. Instead of preparing our students to face the challenges of the twenty-first century, we are narrowing their scope of competence and their vision. There are rarely single correct responses to a problem, but rather a range of solutions. I frequently question whether today's students are cognizant that there is more than one correct response in many situations.

My major concern is that we educate our pre-service teachers to understand the reading process and to be able to establish a classroom program that uses the required materials creatively for the benefit of their students' learning. I know this outcome requires insights that are difficult for inexperienced teachers. The education schools must provide sufficient coursework and practicum experiences to enable this result. All entry-level teachers should be secure enough to develop a reading and writing program that meets the wide range of student needs. Teachers must understand the developmental continuum, know the available materials, and know how to assess their students' achievement levels and progress. Although current education students receive more training in assessment instruments than in the past, I am concerned that students do not gain the understanding of how the individual components fuse to create the reading process. Emphasis appears to be on teaching

the isolated skills components that do not necessarily facilitate the integrated reading process.

I know that many teachers feel inadequate to meet the literacy needs of their students; they seek graduate work in literacy education. Successful graduate programs need to provide opportunities for professional growth through coursework and study as well as opportunities to develop expertise through practicum experiences in classroom and clinical settings. Teachers who complete such programs feel adequate to address the demands of literacy education in the demanding educational environment we find ourselves in today. Graduate programs that do not provide their students with the skills to implement best practices in their classrooms are not meeting the standards for excellence. Furthermore, teachers who do not become involved in the wider literacy community are not exposing themselves to the most recent research findings and successful teaching strategies. Usually, good teaching strategies and methodologies are developed over time and validated in classrooms where their efficacy can be documented. Random design research cannot answer all our instructional questions and should not be the sole resource on which to base educational decisions.

There is a great deal to read about the state of literacy education at this time. Some of my favorite resources are:

- Allington, R.L. (2002). *Big brother and the national reading curriculum: How ideology trumped evidence*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
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- Bracey, G.W. (2003). *On the death of childhood and the destruction of public schools*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Coles, G. (2003). *Reading the naked truth: Literacy, legislation, and lies*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Morrow, L.M., Gambrell, L.B., & Pressley, M. (Eds.) (2003). *Best practices in literacy instruction (2nd ed.)*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Sadoski, M. (2004). *Conceptual foundations of teaching reading*. New York: Guilford Press.
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