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A Conversation with Regie Routman

by William Goepfert

Regie Routman is a reading and writing resource teacher, a reading recovery teacher, a teacher consultant, and an author in the Shaker Heights, Ohio Schools. Her book, *Transitions: From Literature to Literacy* (1988), details her journey from a reliance on isolated skills and a basal reader to the use of literature as the means for teaching students to read. Following is an interview with Routman that presents her personal perspective on the current whole language and literature-based movements in literacy education as well as the impact these movements have had on her growth and development as a teacher.

Question: Regie, you made your change from a basal and the teaching of isolated skills when you were a reading specialist about ten years ago. Tell us a little about your students and their reading instruction.

Routman: I had been a classroom teacher in grades three, four, and six as well as a learning disabilities tutor for about seven years. I was working as a reading specialist and working in a school that was eighty-five percent minority. One-third of the students qualified for Chapter I each year. By the end of first grade, as many as fifty percent of the students qualified for extra help. Many of these children could not hear vowel sounds in words

and were having trouble with the phonics-first approach to reading.

We (teachers) had no alternatives to the basal; we were definitely skills first. I was skills first. Much of my training was in teaching skills, and I taught skills in isolation. I had all of the phonics and skill workbooks and dittos neatly stacked on my shelves. And, it was not working.

Question: What led you to believe that literature could be the basis for helping students to read?

Routman: I started reading children's literature aloud to my remedial reading children, and they were receptive to it. My turning point had to do with the reading of a book called *The Hungry Thing* by Jan Sleplan and Ann Seldler which I read to a group of second graders. They wanted to read that book, and I didn't believe they could read it. I was really tied into readability formulae at that point. The students' standardized test scores were at a first grade level, and this book had a readability of third grade. The book, however, had rhyme, rhythm, repetition, and lovely illustrations. The children loved the story; so, they persisted in trying it, and they were able to read it. They brought the book back to their classroom and were just full of pride that they could read it. I guess I call that my turning point. It made me very aware of the

power of literature to motivate students.

Question: What was your training at that point?

Routman: I was newly certified as a reading specialist and learning disabilities teacher. At that point, I had done no reading in terms of what was going on in other places. I was integrating literature on my own. It was a very natural approach, and as the kids were becoming successful at learning to read I knew that it (the use of predictable books) was working.

I did this for several years, and I knew something magical was happening. Other than my principal, no one else knew about this success with my remedial students.

Question: You say that something magical was happening. But, did you have any concrete proof that using literature in a pull-out program was beneficial?

Routman: In the second year of using literature with kids in my pull-out class we conducted an experiment with a set of twins in first grade. Both qualified for Chapter I and were severely deficient in their language skills as measured by the test given by the speech and language therapist.

I taught one of the kids using only children's literature and the classroom teacher used the basal. I had the one twin only one-half hour a day as part of a group of five students. At the end of the year, the results were dramatic. The student taught only with literature tested out at a beginning third grade level, right at the district mean; the other at 1.7 (first grade, seventh month).

The other dramatic thing was

the literature-based instruction for the one twin enabled her to test out of the speech and language program because her vocabulary had improved so much from hearing and reading stories all the time. Another dramatic thing was found when we interviewed the mother, the literature-taught student's self-esteem was noticeably higher.

You were probably wondering what happened to the other student? We gave her a massive dose of literature in second grade, and she was just fine thereafter.

Question: How much reading training did you have at this time?

Routman: I was in my own little room not really communicating with anybody, not even knowing about what the larger world was doing, nor having heard of Don Holdaway. I was totally green and went to my first IRA meeting about eight years ago. I came back realizing that there was research to support what I was doing, and I began doing a tremendous amount of reading. The first IRA meeting was a big stimulus for me.

Question: You then extended literature from your remedial program to a first grade experience.

Routman: Suggested by our administration, a first-grade teacher and I entered a literature innovation contest which offered a \$1000 prize to be used to buy children's books. The proposal was called "First Grade Book Flood," and it was a plan to flood a first grade with multiple copies of paperback books. Although we didn't win the prize, our director of curriculum (now superintendent) thought this a good idea and gave us \$4000 to do the project

In the Fall of 1983, one teacher and I co-taught literature and writing to a class of first grade children.

What we were able to do, and have continued to be able to do, was based on reading, reflecting and observing children, not on any massive training.

I have (since that time) been trained as a Reading Recovery teacher and have been through the Northeast Ohio Writing Project. But, I think what is really important is that teachers can make change and that they need to trust their own intuition. My transition was based on seeing and believing that children could do and trusting myself. I knew that the basal wasn't really working.

Question: What were you reading?

Routman: We began reading about Don Holdaway and the shared book experience. He was a huge influence on the start of this program. I didn't know anything about the writing process.

I was absolutely cold. But, I read everything that Lucy Calkins wrote and articles by Nancy Atwell and articles by Vera Milz. We took the plunge, started with journal writing at the start of school, and never looked back.

Question: What happened?

Routman: The amazing thing was that the students did far better than we anticipated--far better. We had to order much harder books in the spring.

Question: How did you inform parents of your program that first year?

Routman: One important and good thing we did was open the classroom to

parents. I knew what we were doing was so radically different from what parents were used to. We weren't emphasizing sounding out words as the primary approach; invented spelling was accepted by the teacher but parents six or seven years ago did not know about it.

We had to have parents as our allies. We had to have them in our classroom so they would know what was going on. The classroom was open between 10:00 and 12:00 o'clock every day. We encouraged parents to come in and observe. That first and second year we had parents and babies crawling around the room. Grandparents and fathers also came. I mean it was really a community affair and very special. Not all teachers would be comfortable with this. It is a big risk.

Question: What did the parents do?

Routman: At first, the parents just watched what we were doing, and then we realized we could use their help. For example, in journal writing, it really is important that we conference with each child, and we used them to help us with this.

Question: When you first began your literature-based program did you feel the need to teach isolated skills?

Routman: Absolutely. I did not really believe what I was reading, that the skills could be learned in the context of the students' reading. As an example, we taught sight words in isolation for the first few years of our reading/writing program even though I had read research that said children would pick up these sight words by reading predictable text over and over.

I didn't believe what I was

reading and was afraid that it might not happen. We taught and tested sight words in isolation. The kids had sight words cards on a ring that we checked-off. After three years, it became apparent that the students' were learning them. I don't think my saying it will convince people of that because, I didn't believe it initially when I read it. You have to go through the process and observe children.

Question: What about phonics instruction?

Routman: The same was true for me with phonics. I didn't believe that children could learn to read without a heavy dose of phonics. That was my training. For years I taught a heavy dose of phonics. I thought it was a big part of kids learning to read.

What we did for a number of years, and some teachers are doing today, is to put the phonics in the shared book experience. We took a program and put the words on big word cards and practiced them about five minutes per day. There were no worksheets.

I felt I had to cover phonics. I felt it did help the kids with their writing, but I wouldn't do it today. It took me a long time; so I understand the fears of teachers to give it up (explicit phonics instruction). I am very respectful of teachers and where they are. It is an evolution that a teacher must go through.

Question: It is interesting that when you first started your reading/ writing program, it was not with your average and above-average students.

Routman: It started as a program for our at-risk students' and then quickly

became a program for all our children. Our district has made a commitment to whole language for all children.

I think one of the problems across the country is that Chapter I students' and LD students' are given a different program. What they need is more of the same good teaching and experience with language that the gifted and average students are having.

I believe right now that there are very few students that I would call truly LD. We have had great success teaching the so-called LD student to read because we start with whole meaningful context in reading and writing. I have really changed my thinking about LD.

Question: Do you still have LD classes in your district?

Routman: Yes, however, I do see a shift by LD teachers from a skill-oriented and skills-in-isolation practice (to a literature-based program where skills are taught within the context of a story). What has often happened to a LD student is that he gets more and more phonics (or skills in isolation) which he can't do. I have yet to work with a child who couldn't learn to read with predictable, meaningful text. Often this text is the child's own language.

Question: I am a classroom teacher who is still using and is expected to hold onto the basal. What can I do?

Routman: Teachers can approach the basal differently if they have an understanding of the reading process, especially as it relates to strategy teaching vs. skills teaching. Constance Weaver's excellent book, *Reading Process and Practice* (1988) gives a wonderful, detailed example of how a

basal story can be used more meaningfully than the teacher's manual suggests--in particular, the kinds of questions teachers need to ask to foster a critical discussion. Also, vocabulary could be discussed in the context of the story, not presented in isolation before reading the story. Teachers can also be selective about the basal stories they do use by skipping the ones that are boring and poorly written. And in place of workbooks and skill sheets, teachers could use meaningful reading and writing activities that extend the literature. *Ideas and Insights: Language arts in the elementary school* by Dorothy Watson (1987) gives many fine examples for such activities.

Question: This summer (1988) you had the opportunity to travel to the IRA World Congress in Australia and observe some schools. What were your impressions of the schools that you visited?

Routman: I visited schools for about six days. One practice that impressed me was that teachers have morning tea every day. The teachers, after having taught two hours in the morning, got together to talk and socialize. They really enjoyed that time. I pictured what would happen in the United States if there were morning tea--teachers would stay in their classrooms and correct papers.

I was also impressed with the principals' knowledge about whole language and how children learn. It is not unusual for a principal after five or six years to go back to the classroom. It is not considered a demotion but a way of "keeping in touch."

The third thing I was impressed with is the emphasis on the strengths of the students. Activities and learning are geared to what the child can do. We are very concerned here (in America) with

what the child can't do--in LD, for example, an IEP is geared to the student's deficits. We need to look at the positive things that we are doing.

The schools (abroad) are very child-centered. The students' work is everywhere; you don't see teacher-made bulletin boards. The curriculum is negotiated with the child and the teacher.

Question: What did you notice about their reading and writing in the classrooms?

Routman: The writing process surprised me abroad. I think we do a better job here in America. I saw a lot of writing in the six schools that I visited but I didn't see much conferencing and revising. I saw a lot of teacher intervention--correcting and editing.

I also didn't see much guided reading, small group discussion with children. Mostly, I saw the teacher meeting with students on a one-to-one basis for a very short period of time. Each child had his own little box of books. I think what we do by having the whole group work, the guided reading, and the individualized reading is an advantage, a better balance.

I was very impressed with the spirit of cooperative learning. Even in the very early grades, children work well together in small groups. I think this must be due in part to the fact that teachers have long blocks of time--weekly or monthly--to work with their colleagues. Teachers enjoy the benefits of shared planning and learning and involve their students quite naturally in similar activities.

Question: What does the term whole language mean to you? And, do you consider yourself to be a whole language teacher?

Routman: I have a hard time saying I am a whole language teacher. I struggled with the term in my book, too. I prefer to say that I am in process--you never really get there. I am wary of the label.

Question: How so?

Routman: It is really, really important that we are "inclusive." It worries me when I hear teachers say "she" is a whole language teacher, and "she" is not. I feel very respectful of where teachers are. We all do the best we can. In fact, working with teachers on a daily basis, I am probably more respectful than ever. I can see that teachers are very hard-working, dedicated people. And, the way we are going to make change is to invite people in and not to exclude them. Frank Smith says when talking about evaluation, either say: "Great job" or "How can we help you?" I see that (concept) applying in whole language (when working with teachers).

Question: What can we do to insure that this literature-based movement is not just a fad or trend?

Routman: One of the important things we are doing in our district is to form Language Arts Support Groups in each of our buildings that meet once each week. Teachers get together and discuss theory and research, share ideas of what is working or not working, and bring in activities that they have tried. That has been really valuable in getting a teacher network going and a discussion of theory.

I think understanding the theory of how children learn is really important and underpins all this whole language. This is something that teachers are really impatient with.

I did a workshop the other week, and at the break, a group of teachers came up to me saying that the theory is fine, but when are you going to tell us what activities we can do. I very nicely said: "Once you understand the theory behind this--and it goes K-12--the activities will take care of themselves. You and the students will actually enjoy creating them." This is very hard for teachers. We teachers don't want to bother with theory and research; it is hard. And yet, we want kids to think critically so we have got to think critically, too.

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