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Who Should Critique Phonics Instruction?



CRITIQUE BY **PATRICK GROFF**

In the recent dispute over *Hooked on Phonics* in this journal, its readers were told by Foyne Mahaffey (Winter 1993) that *Hooked on Phonics* is a "multimillion-dollar hype." But later on (Summer 1993), James McCan protested that Mahaffey's judgment of this highly-advertised phonics program is "weak" and "irrelevant."

These contrasting views seem to be irreconcilable conclusions about *Hooked on Phonics*. Nevertheless, they can be used as a means to shed further light and foster new insights on the present "great debate" about phonics teaching.

The Mahaffey-McCan dispute does define clearly the two major sides to this controversy. One side argues that little or no direct, systematic, and intensive teaching of a prearranged sequence of phonics information need be given. This position is based on the "Whole Language" principle that learning to read is the same process as learning to talk. Since children generally require no such formal instruction to learn to speak, only a strict minimum of such teaching is needed in reading programs, it is said.

The second side to this debate contends that direct, systematic, and intensive phonics instruction is absolutely necessary. It finds support for this conclusion in the experimental research on beginning reading. This empirical evidence indicates that formal teaching of phonics information and how to apply it to word recognition is required, but is not sufficient for this purpose.

Not in dispute any longer, for example, between these two sides are

whether students should read more high-quality literature, write a great deal on subjects of their choice, integrate what they learn about reading and writing, and hold that the comprehension of what they read is their ultimate objective. These facts help to define what the phonics debate is all about.

Some of the proponents of Whole Language, who constitute the first side of the above debate, find this controversy to be fruitless. They propose that we discontinue this argument, and declare Whole Language the winner on the basis of its current popularity. Before teachers as a whole accede to this overture, however, they should consider some underlying elements in the Mahaffey-McCan debate:

1. Whole language has announced itself as an ideological paradigm. That is, the leaders of Whole Language remind us often that Whole Language is a philosophy or a worldview about literacy development. Whole language is not, they emphasize, a hypothesis that remains subject to verification from experimental research. The Whole Language paradigm thus defines the questions about teaching that demand to be answered, and the facts in this regard that need to be assembled.

It is noticeable, of late, that leaders of Whole Language concede that the conclusions drawn by the analytic reviews of the experimental research about traditional phonics teaching are accurate. However, they rush to add, experimental research findings are

invalid for deciding how phonics knowledge should be developed. Therefore, the evidence that supports the traditional teaching of phonics information should not be trusted. One of the founders of the Whole Language movement, Frank Smith, says to this effect: "Only one kind of research has anything useful to say about literacy, and that is ethnographic or naturalistic research." Kenneth Goodman, a co-founder of Whole Language, recently echoed this belief in an exclusive reliance on nonexperimental (*qualitative, naturalistic, ethnographic*) research in *The Reading Teacher* (November 1992). Hans Grundin recently has called the scientific method of investigation in reading a "myth." Its use inevitably entraps one into believing that empiricism is infallible, and thus that only experimental evidence has any value, he maintains.

2. The monopoly that Whole Language now holds in the educational literature moreover appears to make unsailable the Whole Language principle that learning to read and to speak are the same process, and therefore that formal teaching of phonics information is not required. In this regard, Mahaffey is correct in noting that the International Reading Association agrees with the Whole Language view of phonics teaching. Over a recent five-year period of *The Reading Teacher*, I counted that this journal published 119 articles that were unservedly complimentary to Whole Language. The only negative commentary about Whole Language allowed during this period was the report of a single debate about it.

The fact remains that teachers today are given very little information about the ever-increasing amount of experimental research that indicates that learning to read and to speak are

not the same process, that is, that this basic principle of Whole Language is wrong. I have collected, in this regard, a list of over 40 recent academic reviews of the experimental research whose conclusions challenge the Whole Language assumption about learning to speak and to read. Only rarely does one find reference to these challenges to Whole Language in the materials about reading instruction available for teachers. (My list is available for teachers. Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to P. Groff.)

3. Nonetheless, is there not a way to "balance," as it were, the arguments from the opposing sides of the phonics teaching debate? If we listen to some leaders of Whole Language, the answer is no. For example, Barry Stierer (1990) finds the advocates of such a "balance" to be making "a spurious attempt to reconcile fundamentally irreconcilable philosophical positions, under the guise of impartially, by reducing the debate to one of techniques" of teaching. Carole Edelsky (1990) retorts that suggestions for a "supposedly impasse-ending research agenda violates everything whole language stands for." It is disingenuous, she maintains, to "expect whole language to be a party to what would be its own undoing." People who argue that there can be a reconciliation between the two sides of the phonics teaching controversy "fail to see that these two competing views are more than different 'takes' on language arts instruction," Edelsky explains. In her judgment each side constitutes an entirely different, incompatible view of education, language, learning, values, philosophy, and political ideology. Each side "uses different discourse" about teaching, and "emanates from a different educational community," she insists. Therefore,

if one is to be a genuine Whole Language teacher he or she may not selectively choose from both experimental and anecdotal evidence that which seems the most applicable for the teaching of phonics information. Such a heterogeneous, nondoctrinaire drawing of information from both these sources about phonics teaching disqualifies one as an authentic Whole Language teacher, Edelsky insists. Indeed, she warns teachers, attempts by those who would broker the conflicting points of view about phonics teaching are to be assiduously avoided. Such efforts are duplicitous, since they aim at "distorting or outright obliterating whole language assumptions, arguments, definitions, and research agendas," she protests.

It must be remembered, however, that those who defend the use of experimental research as the basis for word recognition instruction also are adamant in the defense of their views of phonics teaching. For example, many of the followers of experimental research will not compromise on their disapproval of putting emphasis on the use of context cues in beginning reading instruction. Beginning readers must be weaned away from the use of context cues, not encouraged to use them, it is held. Phonics teaching is seen as the best way to develop quick and accurate (automatic) recognition of individual words, the kind of word identification that mature, able readers use. Context is utilized by good readers, but only after a given word (e.g., *run*) is recognized as such. It is a far different matter, however, to teach students the 179 connotations of *run* than it is to develop their ability to recognize *run* as a unique spelling pattern.

4. The strengths of the convictions of the opposing views on phonics teaching, as illustrated above, make it

unlikely that a new, moderate or balanced position about phonics instruction soon will emerge that both sides of the current debate over it will endorse. Therefore, since teachers are inclined to be eclectic in their choices of reading instruction methodology, they doubtless will have to continue to make personal judgments as to how much direct, systematic, and intensive teaching of a prearranged sequence of phonics information they will carry out.

In this respect, the *Michigan Reading Journal* can be helpful in the future by publishing, (1) articles that exemplify the Whole Language principles of word recognition, and (2) articles by defenders of formal teaching of phonics information. Without this balanced body of knowledge teachers cannot make informed and prudent choices about phonics teaching.

However, it does not appear useful for teachers, who are trying to decide how to arrive at a "middle ground" about phonics teaching, for the MRJ to publish articles about the relative merits of direct and systematic phonics programs written by Whole Language advocates, such as Mahaffey. Since these critics are ideological opponents of such phonics instruction, they are thereby handicapped in making judgments about the relative merits of systematic phonics programs, such as *Hooked on Phonics*. By analogy, one should not trust the critical reviews of medical school textbooks and curricula made by bona fide Christian Scientists. In like manner, it seems impertinent for Whole Language loyalists, such as Mahaffey, to evaluate the comparability or worthiness or value of traditional phonics programs.

Patrick Groff is professor of education emeritus at San Diego State University. He is a member of the board of directors of the National Right to Read Foundation and has served on the advisory council of Gateway Educational Products, which produces Hooked on Phonics.

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