learning about literacy: from theories to trends
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Teacher Librarian; Feb 2008; 35, 3; ProQuest Education Journals
pg. 8

FEATURE ARTICLE

learning about literacy: from theories to trends

TEACH A CHILD WHAT EACH LETTER STANDS FOR AND HE CAN READ. —FLESCH (1955, PP. 2–3)

It has been more than 50 years since Rudolf Flesch's book *Why Johnny Can't Read* (1955) was a bestseller. Flesch argued that schools were not teaching children to read, and he railed against the whole-word method, which he saw as being dominant in schools. Given his experience of teaching a child to read, he advocated the use of phonics. Since then, some of the same arguments for using phonics are repeated in the press, and disagreements about teaching reading have been characterized as the phonics wars. This article does not attempt to argue for or against the teaching of phonics, but it does try to present the dispute in relation to many aspects of the teaching of reading that go far beyond children's decoding ability. It attempts to do so through a look at some of the theories and practices advocated in the last 50 years. Before addressing phonics, however, we need to examine the concept of emergent literacy.

EMERGENT LITERACY

Dolores Durkin wanted to find out what it was that enabled some children to come to school already able to read. Her book *Children Who Read Early* (1966) paved the way for much of the later research in what came to be known as emergent literacy. She found that, among other behaviors, these children engaged in pretend reading and writing and had parents or caretakers who read to them. The basic tenet of this theoretical perspective is that learning to read does not begin at a particular age or developmental stage but that various behaviors lead to an emergent understanding of the process of reading. For example, young children may pretend to read a familiar book, making up a story by attending to the pictures.

Work by Sulzby (1985) and her associates demonstrated that there are several stages that children go through—from pretending to read, to refusing to read, to attending to the graphic information on a page. Read's work (1971) on developmental, or invented, spelling showed that there are stages in children's writing that reveal a growing exploration of the alphabetic principle that underlies the print system, from pretend writing (through using letters to represent sounds in words), to using letters to represent all sounds in a word, to almost-correct spelling and the use of spelling rules. Marie Clay's work (1979) showed how students develop book knowledge (where to begin reading, what a word is, etc.). Over the years, various researchers have looked at children's emergent literacy in a variety of settings and with a variety of children. What has become apparent is that children's exposure to print in the environment and at home influences what they learn about reading and writing and that we can expect certain behaviors to be apparent as children learn to read. Reading books to children is clearly one of the most important aspects of helping this emergent literacy, but another important aspect that has received considerable attention is phonemic awareness, which we now understand is a precursor to understanding phonics.

by peter fisher

PHONICS AND EARLY READING

Phonemic awareness is the ability to segment a spoken word into its constituent sounds. The National Reading Panel (2000) suggested that students are typically able to do this after about 12 hours of instruction. The panel also pointed out that phonemic awareness is a part of phonological awareness—the latter including knowing and making rhymes, alliterations, and the like. The distinction may be more important in theory than in practice; that is, most teachers would not consider teaching one without the other. It is sufficient to recognize that phonemic awareness is important in the process of learning to read and write because it is hard to assign a sound to a symbol unless one can hear it as a separate sound in a word. If you have seen students who write using invented spelling, you know that phonemic awareness is part of what they do as they stretch out a word and try to put a letter for each sound that they hear. In fact, invented spelling is an exploration of written symbols in language and, as such, can be characterized as phonics instruction.

Perhaps it is most important to clarify what most educators believe about phonics instruction: that the debate is not phonics-or-no-phonics;

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more so, it is what type of phonics instruction, how much, and when. Flesch (1955) argued for synthetic phonics—that is, teaching the students sound-symbol correspondences and then have them put the sounds together. Children in this system, for example, learn the sounds for *c*, *a*, and *t* and then synthesize them to make the word *cat*. In contrast, analytic phonics suggests teaching the students the word *cat* and then breaking the word down into its constituent sounds and demonstrating the correspondence to the letters and symbols. Most teachers, being pragmatists, do some combination of analytic and synthetic phonics.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a disagreement in education about the appropriate materials to use when teaching early reading. The old *Dick and Jane* readers and similar basals of the period used a controlled vocabulary. Students learned words in isolation before seeing them in context, thereby supposedly ensuring a successful reading experience. They could use analytic phonics to decode words that were problematic. Some contrasting materials that lent themselves to synthetic phonics provided practice in the phonic elements that the students were learning. The former materials have been demonized with examples like *No, Spot. No!* The latter have critics who mock constructions such as *Can Nan Fan Dan?* Although these criticisms have been overblown—either system produces fairly natural-looking text in materials used at the end of first grade—there was an educational movement in the 1980s that argued for the use of real children's books. The whole-language movement believed that by exposing students to real text in real books, children could acquire literacy skills in much the same way as they acquire speaking skills. As with most movements, there were purists who saw anything that approached phonics instruction in this context as an anathema, and there were those who adopted some version of the approach, especially because it blended well with a renewed emphasis on writing using writing process and writing workshop (I return to this later). Nevertheless, there is some research in early reading that is hard to ignore.

The First-Grade Studies (Bond & Dykstra, 1967) were a series of large research projects completed in the mid-1960s. At numerous sites across the United States and in many classrooms, data were collected comparing different approaches to the teaching of beginning reading: a basal approach, a language experience approach, a phonics approach, among others, including some combinations. Children were tested on a multitude of tests that reflected the field's understanding of reading at the time, and data were collected on families, parents, and communities. The intent was to determine if one approach was more successful than another and if a particular approach was successful in a specific circumstance (e.g., with struggling readers). Despite some debate about the results, researchers generally agreed that there was more variability within an approach than between approaches. That is, factors other than the approach were more important than the pedagogy. Many educators saw this finding as a confirmation that it is the teacher that makes the difference. Other analyses of the data suggested that the time spent teaching reading and the reading of connected texts were important factors (Harris & Serwer, 1966). What these studies show is that attempts to find a best method for teaching reading to all students in all situations is as ridiculous in practice as it is in concept.

Since these studies were conducted, researchers have become aware that teaching a child to use all the cuing systems—graphic, semantic, syntactic—is important in teaching early reading. If a child comes to a word that he or she does not know, then he or she has available graphic information (the letters and words on the page), semantic information (the picture, sentence, and story context), and syntactic information (a noun such as *bird* cannot be the third word in the sentence "If you bring the sandwiches, I will bring the drinks"). It is common now to teach students using predictable books, which reinforce the semantic system. However, it still surprises me how often I hear teachers and parents say, "Sound it out" rather than "What can you do?" If we really want students to become good early readers, then we need to teach them all possible ways of working out unfamiliar words so that they do not become dependent on one strategy. Being able to monitor problems, such as knowing when one is stuck on a word and knowing what to do about it, is a part of metacognition, a concept more commonly applied in relation to comprehension.

COMPREHENSION

In 1978, Durkin published a study that suggested that little comprehension instruction was going on in schools. She said that what passed as instruction was just testing: Teachers asked students questions about what they were reading and provided feedback on whether the answers were correct. Durkin rarely saw instruction that focused on how to get a correct answer or on the process of comprehension. You may believe that this practice is still common, but we have learned a lot since then, and many teachers use techniques that focus students on the process of comprehending and learning from text, partly because of the work of cognitive psychologists in the 1970s. As the field of psychology moved away from behaviorism, researchers were looked for ways to examine cognitive processes, and having participants read and respond to texts provided a window into their thinking. Asking them to think about their own thinking became known as *metacognition*. Researchers in literacy education suddenly had new theories about the reading process and new ways to explore teaching students how to understand texts.

One line of research examined strategies that made explicit the processes that good readers use in comprehending. For example, reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984) asks students to take turns, after reading passages, to question, summarize, clarify, and predict. Each component is one practice that good readers do unconsciously. By making such practices explicit and by embedding them in pedagogy that gives students control over their interaction with text, reciprocal teaching allows teachers and students to model the process of comprehension for each other.

If all reading is purposeful, then setting a conscious purpose is another metacognitive component that can be taught, and know-want-learn (KWL; Ogle, 1986) models

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how readers activate their prior knowledge of a topic before reading, determine what they want to learn, and monitor what they have learned. Although KWL is used by teachers to introduce a topic, it makes processes explicit so that students can use them to learn from a text. Two other commonly taught strategies include those of making connections and utilizing visualization. Both strategies allow students to be metacognitive about their learning and understanding in relation to text.

A second line of research examined how the knowledge that a reader brings to a text influences reading. Clearly, the more that a reader knows about a topic, the easier it is for that reader to read and comprehend a text. But what a student knows about a topic will influence what she or he learns. Schema theory argues that an abstract knowledge structure (i.e., a schema) summarizes what you know about a variety of cases that differ. For example, you may have a schema for a wedding, which would have been constructed from your knowledge of or attendance at various weddings. However, a schema for a Jewish wedding differs in many ways from that for a Catholic wedding. You have probably experienced situations that are unfamiliar to you and where you looked at what others were doing to determine how you should behave. In relation to reading, this concept means that new learning may be incorporated into an existing schema or result in major modification of a schema. Although this line of research was promising, there was debate about how schema and conceptual knowledge were related: "An important theoretical puzzle is to determine just how much and what sort of knowledge is abstracted, and how much remains tied to specific instances" (Pearson, 1984, p. 259). By highlighting the importance of prior knowledge of a topic to reading, this research resulted in an emphasis on teacher preparation of the students before reading.

A third line of research looked at response to literature. Literacy researchers in the 1980s discovered Louise Rosenblatt's work on reader response, primarily formulated in the book *The Reader, the Text, and the Poem* (1968), which she wrote in the field of literary criticism. Her thesis—that reader response to text is influenced by what the reader brings to the text (i.e., reader's prior knowledge)—fit well with theories of reading process that also focus on prior knowledge. A consequence of reader response theory is that multiple interpretations of a text may be valid. If this is viewed in contrast to the traditional teacher questioning approach to reading comprehension, it allows teachers to promote discussion of literature rather than teach the right response or argue about what the author intended. Literature circles (Daniels, 1994) and book clubs (McMahon & Raphael, 1997) are two common ways in which teachers organize their classrooms for structured discussion of texts. This approach is also important for those who advocate the use of real literature in reading instruction.

VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

The emphasis on the effect of prior knowledge intersects with vocabulary knowledge in relation to comprehension and print skills. It is hard to decode a word if you have never seen it or heard it, and it is hard to understand a text unless you know the meaning of most of the words. There have been two emphases in research on vocabulary instruction as it pertains to meaning: first, how many words can be learned and which words should be taught; second, how should we teach particular words and independent word learning.

Nagy and Anderson (1984) suggested that there are 88,000 word families in printed school English. This finding is based on an analysis of books and other materials used by students in grades 3–9. In a later analysis, they argued that if multiple meanings of words, idioms, and proper nouns are included, there may be as many as 180,000 word families. However, if the concern is the number of words that a student must learn, then most of these words are infrequent and may occur only once or twice in student texts. More recently, researchers (Biemiller, 2003; Marzano, 2004) have produced lists of words sometimes referred to as *root words*, which should be known in each grade. The suggestion is that a student can be successful in school if he or she learns these words, totaling about 4,000. Some school districts have taken this idea further and have identified words that should be taught in each of the content areas at each grade level. Although few can argue with the intent of such lists, if vocabulary learning is limited to just these words, then the richness of English is diluted, and the fun of word learning may be lost.

In relation to vocabulary instruction, Blachowicz and Fisher (2006) identified four principles of vocabulary teaching, suggesting that an effective vocabulary teacher immerses students in words, develops independent word learners, models good word-learning behaviors, and uses assessment that matches the goals of instruction. Within these guidelines are many effective methods of teaching particular words, depending on the depth of knowledge that is needed. For example, simple mnemonic devices can link a word with a definition. Conversely, complex graphics allow students to process a word's meaning in a variety of ways for deeper understanding. In many classrooms, teachers ask students to look in a dictionary to find the meaning of a word, to then write its definition, and to use the word in a sentence. Unfortunately, this is one of the least effective methods of word learning; students are normally comfortable using words only after experiencing them in several contexts.

Perhaps the most important thing to notice is that knowledge of word meanings accrues gradually. When we first hear or see a word, we may learn something about it, and we may add to that knowledge during subsequent exposures. Typically, it will be part of our receptive vocabulary (listening and reading) for a considerable time before it becomes part of our productive vocabulary (speaking and writing). Some recent work has focused on the development of word consciousness, primarily by making word learning an important element of classroom instruction and by making it fun.

Finally, we know that students incidentally learn many words from hearing and seeing them. Teachers often try to teach students how to use context to work out the meanings of words. There have been

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attempts to classify contexts and to teach these classifications to students, but these efforts have generally not been successful. More generic instruction, perhaps asking students "to look in and look around," can help. To determine the meaning of a word, a student "looks in" by examining a word's structure and morphemes; then he or she "looks around" by studying the context of the sentence and passage. Such a strategy asks a student to be metacognitive in relation to meaning, not just at the passage level, but also at the word level.

FLUENCY

There has been greater emphasis the last few years on the teaching of oral reading fluency. A fluent reader is one who understands the text and does not make many errors in reading. Clearly, there is a relationship among ability in print skills, vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, and fluency. One reason for teaching oral reading fluency is that it leads to better silent reading fluency. A second is that some research suggests that teaching fluency leads to better comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). To describe the three components of oral reading fluency, teachers use the terms *rate*, *accuracy*, and *expression*: They want students to read at an appropriate rate (not too fast, not too slow), with a high degree of accuracy, and with good expression. Most methods that teach fluency include some form of repeatedly reading a passage (Rasinski, Blachowicz, & Lems, 2006). Of course, when a student rereads a passage, he or she is less likely to have issues with print skills or vocabulary; that is, because the first reading will have prepared him or her for the content, he or she will understand it better. Many schools are now using some form of fluency assessment, commonly called *curriculum-based assessment*, for brief evaluations of students' reading because measures of fluent reading correlate highly with other measures of reading. However, listening to a child read orally for a brief time does not provide much insight into the strengths and weaknesses that student may possess in reading, although it can be used to place a student for instruction or into the right level book.

WRITING

One of the most influential pieces of research conducted in literacy education during the past half century is Don Graves's *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (1983). It is the book that did more than any other to introduce the idea of writing workshops with young students. Graves's research, beginning with his dissertation (1974), demonstrated that the concept of a writing workshop, which had been used with only college students and professional writers, was feasible with children in first grade. The idea of giving students control over what they write, when to write, and in what form they write and to write for an audience of their peers completely changed educators' approach to writing. Without a writing workshop and its focus on the process of writing (rather than the product), the whole-language movement may not have had the impact that it did. Although some of the implementation of writing workshop has changed over the years—with less emphasis on conferences, for example—the idea that the writing process should be the focus of instruction has stayed and has been incorporated into many state standards. Many of Graves's colleagues and educators such as Nancy Atwell (1998) and Lucy Calkins (1983) have added to our knowledge and understanding of the writing process, how it develops in children, and how best to teach it. Perhaps the greatest legacy is to remind teachers how important choice is in relation to motivating students.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I have tried to address many of the changes in literacy instruction over the last 50 years as a way of thinking about what teachers are doing now and why. Some areas I have not written about, such as instruction for students whose native language is not English, as well as assessment and the standards movement. Clearly, No Child Left Behind and the writing of standards by the state and major professional organizations have had considerable impact on various forms of instruction—in particular, assessment. These topics, however, are outside the scope of this article.

BOOKMARKIT

JUNIOR FICTION

FINDING YOUR PLACE

Among the free. Margaret Peterson Haddix. Simon & Schuster, 2006. $5.99. 978-0-689-85799-7. Grades 6–8. Thirteen-year-old "shadow child" Luke has spent his life hiding in fear, even after the Population Police's defeat. Then, he overhears a plot to take society back to the old days. Is he brave enough to speak up?

Born to rule: A Camp Princess novel. Kathryn Lasky and Amy Saidens. HarperCollins, 2006. $15.99. 978-0-06-058761-1. Grades 5–7. Princess Alicia's stay at Camp Princess is not going so well. Mean girls, an untrainable songbird, a failed swimming test, a haunted turret—what else can go wrong?

Bounce. Natasha Friend. Scholastic, 2007. $16.99. 978-0-439-85350-7. Grades 6–8. When Evyn's widower dad presents her and her brother with a new mom (whom Evyn hardly knows) and six new siblings, Evyn does not want to bounce back from the changes. She wants her old life back!

No talking. Andrew Clements. Ill. Mark Elliott. Simon & Schuster, 2007. $15.99. 978-1-4169-0983-5. Grades 4–6. When the notoriously noisy Laketon Elementary fifth graders declare a gender-divided "no talking for 48 hours" contest, the faculty is thrilled by the resulting quiet—until it starts interfering with class. However, ending the contest early will not be easy.

River secrets. Shannon Hale. Bloomsbury, 2006. $17.95. 978-1-58234-901-5. Grades 6–8. In this sequel to *Goose Girl* and *Enna Burning*, Enna, Finn, and Razo are sent to Tira with the Bayern ambassador, where they discover a plot to kill the ambassador and plunge both countries into war. Can they thwart it?

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The diagnosis and instruction of students with reading difficulties has similarly been omitted. In relation to diagnosis, Goodman's work (1969) on the analysis of oral reading miscues as a window on reading difficulties has been a major influence. In relation to instruction, there has been considerable emphasis on early intervention. Both these topics deserve fuller coverage than what is possible here. New theories are always being developed about why children fail to learn to read—Flesch (1955) does not have a monopoly on simple solutions—and new brain research has promise in relation to those with severe difficulties, but there are many ways to successfully teach children to read, as there are many ways to teach them most things. Sometimes amid the outcry about students who are failing to learn to read, we ignore the fact that most students do leave school with fairly high levels of literacy, which enable them to successfully interact with various forms of information and with wonderful books.

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Feature articles in *TL* are blind-refereed by members of the advisory board. This article was submitted in November 2006 and accepted in April 2007.

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