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Whole Language Reading Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities: Caught in the Cross Fire

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ABSTRACT A philosophic orientation referred to as the whole language movement is rapidly changing the nature of reading and writing instruction in our schools. Although most of the changes are positive, some have produced intense debate, particularly in relationship to beginning reading instruction. Many practitioners are questioning how this shift away from traditional skill-based classroom instruction will affect the reading development of students with learning disabilities. This article reviews the history of the reading instruction controversy and the application of remedial methodologies for students with learning disabilities. The premise is developed that although most students learn to read naturally, some students require more systematic, explicit instruction to become proficient, fluent readers. The author concludes that students with severe learning disabilities may learn to read in a whole language, mainstream classroom, as long as appropriate, supplemental instruction is provided, a variety of instructional techniques are employed, and the intensity and duration of the services are based upon the individual's needs.

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WHOLE LANGUAGE VS. CODE-EMPHASIS APPROACHES

In analyzing beginning reading programs, two seemingly diverse methodological orientations emerge: basic skill or code-emphasis (Chall, 1967) versus whole language or meaning-based approaches. Whole language is not one reading method, but rather a coherent philosophy of language, curriculum, learning, and teaching (Goodman, 1989). It is a set of beliefs about the world and people (King & Goodman, 1990). Within a whole language classroom, many reading methods are possible to promote natural learning. The key distinction that emerges between whole language theorists and traditional educators involves the role of explicit, skill-by-skill decoding instruction in the teaching of reading (McKenna, Robinson, & Miller, 1990a, 1990b). Whole language theorists feel that decontextualized instruction disrupts the reading process, whereas code-emphasis methodologists believe that specific instruction in word structure in decontextualized frameworks is often necessary and facilitates reading acquisition. Many whole language theorists oppose direct instruction in decoding and object to teaching practices that fragment the language arts into hierarchies of discrete skills (Goodman, 1986). Focus on the subsystems of language results in useless, time-wasting, and confusing instruction (King & Goodman, 1990). Purists insist that you cannot have both a whole language and a basic skills approach because they contradict each other (Heymsfeld, 1989). Carefully controlled vocabulary and decontextualized phonics instruction are incompatible with meaningful, authentic texts (Goodman, 1989). Within a whole language orientation, meaning-making is the focus of reading and writing; whole, meaningful texts are used, not isolated words, sounds, or vocabulary-controlled stories (Edelsky, Draper, & Smith, 1983). The underlying belief is that children will learn language rules without explicit instruction (King & Goodman, 1990).

Upon entering the first-grade classroom, a visitor notices a sign informing the children of the clues to use for deciphering unknown words when reading. The list includes: (a) make up a word that makes sense, (b) read ahead, (c) guess, or (d) skip it. A parent, observing the poster, wonders: Why aren't the students being advised to try and "sound out" the word? Shouldn't students also be encouraged to take advantage of the available graphophonic information? When the parent asks the teacher about this omission, the teacher responds that basic reading skills are not a focal point of instruction in her classroom. The parent, who may remember being taught to read with a phonics approach, is puzzled. After all, knowledge of phonics helps children identify words.

Teachers, spurred by a philosophic orientation that is often referred to as the whole language movement, are changing the nature of reading and writing instruction in our schools. Although most of the changes are

recommended the *Remedial Reading Drills* (Hegge, Kirk, & Kirk, 1936), a structured phonics approach. By teaching a student structured phonics, Flesch asserted that a child's emotional problems will "disappear like snow in the sun."

Kirk and Kirk (1956) disapproved of Flesch's recommendation to teach phonics to all children and countered that he advocated an extreme use of phonics and exaggerated the opposing point of view. They explained that the reading drills were designed for the limited group of children who need help in learning to recognize details in words, not the majority of children who acquire this ability naturally and independently of direct instruction.

After a careful, extensive review of research conducted on beginning reading instruction, Chall (1967) recommended a change in beginning reading methods from meaning-emphasis programs to code-emphasis programs. Chall also advocated eclecticism in approaches. She described the pendulum effect that occurs when firm allegiance is given to one or another approach for teaching beginning reading. New criticism is directed at the approach that "wins out" for the moment. When students receive too much or unnecessary training in systematic phonics, another reaction occurs. A new best seller will angrily denounce the prevailing trend to emphasize a linguistic or a phonics approach. The suggested "cure" will be the natural approach, one that emphasizes whole-word instruction, meaning, and appreciation of literature for teaching beginning reading (Chall, 1967).

In reviewing Chall's work, Smith, Goodman, and Meredith (1970) indicated that both approaches described were designed to teach children decoding skills. What Chall described as a code-emphasis approach relates to phonics programs and what she described as a meaning-emphasis approach relates to sight word programs. They indicated that neither of these programs is sufficient for beginning reading instruction because reading is a psycholinguistic process whereby the reader uses his experiential and conceptual knowledge to reconstruct the writer's message. Reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game that involves partial use of available minimal language cues that are selected from perceptual input based upon the reader's expectation (Goodman, 1967). Goodman explained, "Efficient reading does not result from precise perception and identification of all elements, but from skill in selecting the fewest, most productive cues necessary to produce guesses which are right the first time" (p. 127). Goodman advised that insistence on precise word identification may cause the reader to use only graphic information. In fact, teaching with lists and phonic charts may actually impede development. Consequently, reading teachers should abandon their preoccupation with letters and words and focus on reading as communication (Smith, Goodman, & Meredith, 1970).

More recently, after a further review of pertinent studies, Chall (1983) concluded that research support for the effectiveness of initial phonics instruction appears to be even stronger than it was in 1967. Several recent publications have provided further support that students have an advantage in learning to read if they

are taught using well-designed phonics instruction (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Finn, 1986; Samuels, 1986).

When whole language/language experience approaches are compared to basal reading approaches, one methodology does not appear superior to another. Stahl and Miller (1989) conducted an extensive review of research that compared basal reading approaches to whole language or language experiences approaches for beginning reading instruction. They concluded that the approaches are approximately equal to their effects with a few exceptions. Whole language/language experience approaches appeared to be most effective in kindergarten to help students develop concepts regarding language and print, whereas basal reading approaches appeared more effective in first grade for helping students acquire word recognition skills.

LEARNING TO READ IS NATURAL?

Fortunately, most students learn to read regardless of the selected approach or despite ineffective instruction. Liberman, Shankweiler, and Liberman (1989) describe the lucky 75% of the students who master the alphabetic code without explicit instruction. These students, who possess strengths in the phonological domain, intuitively discover the relationships between spoken and written words and learn to read with any method. For these students, reading instruction should be meaning-based with the goal of expanding the student's linguistic and conceptual knowledge.

Some students, however, do not intuitively develop knowledge of the alphabetic principle and may require more explicit instruction in the letter-sound relationships of the English language. For these students, Liberman et al. explain that meaning-based reading methods, such as whole language and language experience approaches, are likely to be disastrous. Unless provided with additional assistance in phonological structure, the students remain locked into a sight-word stage of reading. Liberman et al. predicted that these children "are likely to join the ranks of the millions of functional illiterates in our country who stumble along, guessing at the printed message from their inadequate store of memorized words, unable to decipher a new word they have never seen before" (p. 24). Similarly, in the *Newsweek* interview (Kantrowitz, 1990), Chall suggests that a whole-language method works against poor children, immigrants, and students with learning disabilities.

Samuels (1986) provided an illustration that supports Chall's conclusion. He reviewed the work of Fetzelson (1973), who demonstrated why children from Israeli middle-class homes did better in school than children from lower-class homes. Because the Hebrew language has a high degree of sound-symbol correspondence, it lends itself to the teaching of phonics in beginning reading instruction. During the 1940s, a whole word child's center of interest method was the only permissible method to use in schools. In the 1950s, with mass immigration from Arab countries, there was an alarming increase in reading failure. A study was conducted to identify the reasons for reading successes and failures

crease awareness of phonemic structure and recognition of word parts. This multisensory, modified language experience approach emphasizes meaning: Students learn words as they compose their own stories. Research has documented the effectiveness of this technique. For example, Fernald (1943) found that in treating 93 students with moderate to severe reading disabilities, the kinesthetic method resulted in normal or superior reading for all but one student. More recently, in a series of 14 experiments, Hulme (1981) demonstrated that subjects with reading disabilities remembered words better when they were allowed to trace them. He concluded that tracing aids visual-verbal paired associative learning by helping students with reading disabilities learn to associate and retain written and spoken forms. He also observed that many students with reading disabilities were unable to segment words into their constituent phonemes and to recognize similarities in sound among words.

PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS AND READING ACHIEVEMENT

Research results suggest that children with dyslexia do not have available phoneme segmentation skills or phonological memory codes at a time when these skills are required for learning to read (Snowling, 1987). As a result, they are unable to decode unfamiliar words in their reading. Some students come to school without the expected and required oral language proficiency (Westby, 1990) and, consequently, have difficulty acquiring reading skills. As Liberman, Shankweiler, and Liberman (1989) noted, the students who learn to read by any method are the ones who when tested in kindergarten have strengths in the phonological domain.

Predictor of reading achievement. The phonemic awareness of children entering school may be the single most powerful determinant of reading success or failure (Adams, 1990; Stahl, Osborn, & Lehr, 1990). Results from a longitudinal study of 543 children indicated that phonological processing tasks were one of the best predictors of reading achievement at the end of kindergarten and first grade (Share, Jorm, Maclean, & Matthews, 1984). Additionally, a strong, highly specific relationship exists between knowledge of nursery rhymes and development of phonological skills (Maclean, Bryant, & Bradley, 1987). These findings suggest that individual differences in phonological awareness prior to school entry are highly related to and predictive of the ability to learn to read in first grade. In fact, the low decoding skill observed in poor readers may be primarily attributed to a lack of phonological awareness that impairs ability to segment, analyze, and synthesize speech sounds (Stanovich 1982a, 1982b). Findings also indicate that simple phonological skills are significantly related to reading and spelling performance through high school; poor readers at all grades having failed to master these skills (Calfee, Lindamood, & Lindamood, 1973). In a longitudinal study, Juel (1988) found that 9 out of 10 students who entered first grade with low phonemic

awareness were in the bottom quartile on decoding and comprehension measures 4 years later.

Training in phonological awareness. Fortunately, considerable evidence demonstrates that phonological awareness can be developed and that training produces improved performance in reading and spelling. In a longitudinal study, Vellutino and Scanlon (1987) found that direct instruction in phonemic segmentation of second- and sixth-graders improved word identification skill. They concluded that ability to analyze word structure phonemically is essential for building a sizable reading vocabulary and that reading success depends on an individual's ability to store and retrieve phonological associations.

In another longitudinal study, Bradley and Bryant (1983) tested 400 children on phonemic awareness prior to learning to read. Sixty-five students who were low in phonemic awareness were divided into two groups, a control group and a group that received phonemic awareness training. The students who received the training scored significantly higher when in first, second, and fifth grades than the controls in reading and spelling. Phonological awareness training in preschool has a facilitating effect on reading and spelling acquisition (Lundberg, Frost, & Petersen, 1988).

When providing instruction, a metacognitive approach to phonemic awareness training may be most effective. First-grade children who received training in blending and segmentation and reflected upon and discussed the value, application, and purpose of these skills outperformed students who only received skill and drill instruction (Cunningham, 1989). This finding suggests that it is important to help children understand how phonemic knowledge is related to learning to read.

To summarize, the evidence suggests that a deficiency in phonological skill can directly affect the development of decoding skills. Some students will acquire these skills through reading because a reciprocal relationship exists between phonemic knowledge and learning to read. Acquisition of orthographic principles through reading enables the discovery of parallel phonemic principles (Perfetti, Beck, Bell, & Hughes, 1987). Other children will need to develop a conscious awareness of the linguistic components of speech and how these components relate to word identification. Appreciation of the alphabetic principle depends upon phonemic awareness (Adams, 1990; Stahl, Osborn, & Lehr, 1990). When phonemic skills do not develop naturally or children come to school with limited language backgrounds, systematic instruction is often required. Understanding that words have an internal structure is, in fact, a necessary achievement for use and understanding of an alphabetic script (Liberman & Liberman, 1990).

BALANCE THE LANGUAGE SYSTEMS

In providing reading instruction, a teacher tries to facilitate balance of the language systems to help the student use graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic knowledge to aid in word recognition and, conse-

quently, reconstruction of meaning. When a student cannot grasp the meaning with higher-level strategies, he or she can engage a lower-level strategy, such as knowledge of letter-sound associations (Clay, 1985). Good readers use both top-down (conceptually derived) and bottom-up (phonemically derived) mental processing when reading (Idol, 1988), whereas poor readers operate on a narrow range of strategies (Clay, 1985).

Interactive-compensatory model. In contrast to a conceptually-driven view of the reading process, Stanovich (1980) suggested that top-down information combines with bottom-up information in an interactive-compensatory model. A deficit in any particular process results in greater reliance on the other processes. In other words, readers use contextual constraints in a compensatory manner: When decoding skill is not automatic and the reader struggles to identify words, context facilitates processing; when decoding skill is automatic and words are rapidly identified, context has no effect on word identification skill. Unskilled readers make greater use of context than skilled readers to compensate for their difficulties in decoding (Pring & Snowling, 1986).

Eye movements. Studies of the eye movements of good and poor readers also provide support for Stanovich's model of the reading process. Good readers do not skip over words, whereas poor readers sample the print, guessing at words they are unable to identify (Rayner & Pollatsek, 1987). Rayner and Pollatsek observed that words that are predictable from context receive shorter fixations and are more likely to be skipped, than less frequent or less predictable words. When a word is not readily identified, attention to graphophonic information is often necessary (McConkie & Zola, 1987). Considering these findings, one must question the wisdom of encouraging students who are having marked difficulty with word recognition to skip or guess at unknown words. It is only after a child learns to read that miscues, which do not distort meaning, are of minor importance (Heilman, 1985). Students must be provided with all of the elements and language codes for constructing meaning (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Given that a text is at an appropriate instructional level, a student should not be encouraged to skip words, but rather to study a word and then reread the sentence in which it appears (Adams, 1990; Stahl, Osborn, & Lehr, 1990).

Automacity. Psycholinguistic theory is derived from observations of efficient readers. A potentially dangerous generalization is that whereas skilled readers do not appear to use letter-sound cues, children learning how to read do not need to be taught letter-sound relationships (Heilman, 1985). Students need to develop some understanding of letter-sound relationships in the beginning reading stage. Fast, accurate word identification results when readers are so familiar with letter-sound relationships that words are identified automatically (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). In fact, context-free word recognition is the most apparent characteristic of reading ability (Perfetti, 1985). To obtain automaticity in word recognition, some children require extremely high levels of overlearning and practice (Felton & Wood, 1989).

THE NEED FOR EXPLICIT INSTRUCTION

This article has focused on the need for explicit instruction in word recognition for the students with learning disabilities who do not develop these skills easily and naturally. As this is the focal point of disagreement between whole language and code-emphasis advocates, students who are members of a whole language classroom may be deprived of the necessary instruction in basic reading skills and as a result, enter the third-grade classroom with poor decoding abilities. The intent is not to suggest that students with learning disabilities be subjected to meaningless drills or an endless series of workbook pages. The optimum amount of instruction in letter-sound relationships for any child is the *minimum* amount that child needs to become an independent reader (Heilman, 1985). Children with learning disabilities should be immersed in literature, be active classroom participants, be in a language-rich environment, and most importantly, be taught to read.

MATCHING MATERIALS TO INSTRUCTIONAL LEVELS

One final caveat regarding the use of literature-based readers in a classroom of heterogeneous students: A teacher must provide texts at appropriate instructional levels for the students. For students with limited (or accelerated) oral language proficiency, the teacher must make a match between the students' present pragmatic, semantic, syntactic, and graphophonic skills and the language level of the materials that they are using (Westby, 1990). Effective language learning requires that the input is comprehensible to the student and only one step above the child's present language abilities (Krashen, 1982).

Ladas (1980) presents two crucial facts for education and psychology related to instructional planning: (a) students have differences in learning rate, and (b) a wide span of student ability exists in any grade. Under optimal instructional conditions, students need a different amount of time to learn; consequently, procedures designed to treat students as equal are ineffective for students in either the lower or upper ranges or both (Carroll, 193). As Betts (1946) observed: "No one can justify ordering thirty similar third-grade workbooks for the thirty dissimilar third-grade pupils found in any classroom in the country" (p. 525). After appraising the status of high school reading in 1965, Muskopf and Robinson (1966) asserted that each day in the United States 3 million children are given literature textbooks that they cannot read. Hopefully, the count would be lower today, one hopes.

CONCLUSION

As noted in the *Newsweek* article, good teachers are committed to balanced, eclectic approaches; they provide whatever a child needs to achieve optimal growth in language and reading development. As new practices emerge, veteran teachers adapt these methods to fit

their notion of what works with the students they teach (Pearson, 1989). One worries, however, about new teachers, particularly those who have been indoctrinated by college training programs into one camp. With whole language indoctrination, how many years does it take teachers to realize that some students will require explicit instruction in the alphabetic code? Will a whole language orientation result in teachers ignoring the alphabetic principle on which our language is based (MacGinitie, 1991)? With phonics or direct skill instruction indoctrination, how many years does it take teachers to discover that most children do not require extensive instruction in the alphabetic code to learn to read and, consequently, the students' valuable time, time that could be spent reading literature, is being wasted? In the interim, while the teachers are learning through the discovery method, what happens to the reading development of the children? A negative outcome of the revolutionary spirit of the whole language movement may be that many children are trapped in poor programs produced in the heat of intense ideological debates (Pearson, 1989). As MacGinitie (1991) noted, the sad result is that children receive the best and worse of each new educational trend.

Understanding of the reading process would be hastened if the reading paradigm wars were ended and investigators agreed to coexist peacefully (Stanovich, 1990). The pendulum effect holds reading instruction hostage and suppresses significant modifications in strategy (Heilman, 1985). Teachers become hesitant to modify or alter the "accepted" instructional method. The dichotomy between phonics and meaning-based instruction that has dominated the field of reading is false (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). After all, most theorists and practitioners agree that: (a) the purpose of reading is reconstructing meaning; (b) teachers and students should be active participants in literary acquisition; (c) students should be provided with integrative learning experiences and engage in meaningful reading and writing activities; (d) students should be intrinsically motivated, acquire skill in self-monitoring, and develop responsibility for their own learning; and, (e) children's literature is valuable and belongs in reading programs.

A more descriptive metaphor than a pendulum to describe the historic zigzag movement of acceptance of reading approaches is the tacks made by a sailing ship as it traverses its course. Although at certain points the ship turns with the wind and sails in the opposite direction, the movement is always forward. For remedial reading instruction, new approaches emerge that are child-centered and provide explicit skill instruction in contextualized formats. One example is *Reading Recovery* (Clay, 1985), an early intervention program that has been highly successful in teaching children with reading difficulties how to use a variety of strategies to comprehend text. With this method, first- or second-grade students receive one-to-one instruction from a trained teacher for thirty minutes daily for twelve to fifteen weeks. Even with this intensive, tutorial program, however, 1-2% of the participants continue to require special interventions to learn to read (Watson, 1991).

The major objective of all reading instruction is to enhance ability to derive meaning from text. For some children, however, poor decoding is a major impediment to comprehension. As Glass (1973) noted: "Thus we can state what at first only seems a contradiction: decoding is at once a least important aspect of reading, and at the same time the most crucial aspect of reading. If one does not learn to decode efficiently and effectively, one will never be allowed the opportunity to read, i.e., deal with and react to meaning via the printed word" (pp. 4-5). A reading approach that emphasizes decoding is not at odds with one that emphasizes comprehension (Shankweiler, 1989). In discussing the nature of reading difficulties, Shankweiler indicated that "a genuine concern with what limits reading comprehension leads us back to decoding difficulties and their causes" (p. 64). As Monroe (1932) noted, even though their remedial methodology stressed the mechanics of word recognition, this was not an end in itself, but rather a means for accomplishing the final goal, the construction of meaning. Skillful word reading depends uncompromisingly upon a deep and thorough acquisition of sound-symbol relationships (Adams, 1990; Stahl, Osborn, & Lehr, 1990). Students who develop good word recognition abilities are better prepared to read quality literature with enjoyment and understanding (Stahl & Miller, 1989).

For students who learn to read easily, it seems sensible and advisable to use a natural approach to beginning reading instruction: an approach that is meaning-based, promotes interest, and emphasizes language comprehension and literature. Most children do not require special, intensive methodologies to learn to read. For children who do not learn to read easily and have difficulty in forming associations between sounds and printed symbols, special methods are required (Goldberg, Shiffman, & Bender, 1983). These methods may involve teaching letter-sound associations in contextualized formats, or if necessary, decontextualized formats.

One best method does not exist for teaching reading to children. A study of the history of reading instruction shows that almost every conceivable technique has been used to teach children to read (Fernald, 1943). No program can do all things for all children, nor be all things for all teachers (Chall, 1967). Two facts, however, remain: (a) all children do not learn to read by the same method, and (b) different children require different reading methods at different times in their development.

When asked what is the right method for teaching children to read, one should answer: The right method is the method or combination of methods that helps the child learn to read (Goldberg, Schiffman, & Bender, 1983). Written language is like a safe-deposit box: more than one key is needed to unlock it (Heymsfeld, 1989). As teachers of students with learning disabilities, we may incorporate the spirit and theoretical orientation of the whole language movement, while we continue to provide appropriate instruction by selecting the most efficacious routes for helping students become proficient, lifelong readers. Students with severe reading disabilities may learn to read in a whole language, main-

stream classroom, as long as appropriate, explicit instruction is provided, a variety of instructional techniques are employed, and the intensity and duration of the provided services are based on the individual's needs.

A final true scenario... A special education teacher recounted the story of her visit to a third-grade classroom. Students were engaged in a round-robin reading activity. Larry, who was wide-eyed and listening intently to his classmates read, suddenly turned to his teacher and queried: "Hey, when is somebody going to teach me to read?" We can only respond: "One hopes, soon."

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