

Fighting Words

Despite overwhelming research evidence, whole language advocates won't concede defeat.

By Ramesh Ponnuru

Suddenly, everyone's hooked on phonics. After the reading scores of California students dropped precipitously, a bipartisan majority of the state legislature voted to mandate that teachers be trained in phonics. In Texas, Governor Bush pushed through a similar law. Massachusetts now mandates phonics instruction, as do several other states. The triumph of phonics would be great news, if only it were true. The news accounts may give the impression of triumph, but parents need to read between the lines.

These days, it's rare to find a school that does not claim to teach phonics, but whole language programs such as Reading Recovery remain prevalent. A typical formulation can be found in a position of the International Reading Association, a whole language redoubt, which says that "phonics instruction should be embedded in the context of a total reading/language program".

An even bigger problem is that most teachers have never been trained in phonics themselves. Most ed-school textbooks promote whole language and denigrate phonics, while professional associations exert peer pressure for whole language.

From their trenches in the ed schools, whole language theorists have attempted to counter the political tide now running in favour of phonics. A common tack is to reject quantitative research altogether for research that is "not replicable" because it "focuses on a reader in a certain context". With the notion of objective evidence and thus the possibility of accountability out of the picture, the theorists are then free to concentrate on the motives of their opponents.

Opposition to whole language is cast as a plot by the "far right" to exploit the fundamentalist fanaticism and "overwhelming fear of change" of Christian conservatives. The far right's purpose in "frightening and politicizing rural and working class parents", according to whole language guru Ken Goodman, is to reduce confidence in the public schools and, ultimately, to privatize them. The paranoia cannot be overstated.

Goodman writes, "It is the visible success of whole language, not its weaknesses, that has made it the target of a powerful coalition of forces". Reporters who attack whole language are encouraged in advance and rewarded afterward by the CEOs of their parent publishers. "Efforts are highly coordinated; often one sees identical wording in bills in states far apart geographically." Call the police!

Organization for Quality Education, March 2000

Why have so many moderate, non-fundamentalist parents joined this far-right crusade? Three whole language theorists, writing in the March 1, 1999 *Phi Delta Kappan*, suggest that “some parents are unconsciously terrified of their children’s dawning independence, as symbolized by their learning to read and write... As long as a child spends most of her time enunciating t’s and d’s and decoding only synthetic, denatured texts, she will never encounter troubling or dangerous ideas, or begin to think and read for herself.”

In a remarkable article in *Reading Research Quarterly*, Mark Dressman strives mightily to insinuate that scholarly critics of whole language are promoting a racist/capitalist agenda. Such rhetoric is evidence of desperation in the whole language ranks. As Sandra Stotsky of the Harvard Graduate School of Education succinctly puts it, “They’re going off the cliff.”

Still, Robert Sweet of the National Right to Read Foundation takes an optimistic view: “I would say although the mop-up crew hasn’t finished yet, I believe we have truly turned a corner.” With fewer than 15% of American children learning phonics by his rough estimate, that mop-up crew has a lot of work ahead.

Members of the far-right conspiracy to dismantle the public schools, meanwhile, can take heart that the Democratic Party of California and the linguistics department at MIT have joined them.

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