

Social Injustice

Whole language policies are disproportionately harmful to disadvantaged children.

By Keith E. Stanovich

“In holding to an irrationally extreme view on the role of phonics in reading education — for failing to acknowledge that some children do not discover the alphabetic principle on their own and need systematic direct instruction in the alphabet principle, phonological analysis, and alphabetic coding — whole language proponents threaten all of their legitimate accomplishments.

“Eventually — perhaps not for a great while, but eventually — the weight of empirical evidence will fall on their heads. That direct instruction in alphabetic coding facilitates early reading acquisition is one of the most well established conclusions in all of behavioural science.

“Conversely, the idea that learning to read is just like learning to speak is accepted by no responsible linguist, psychologist, or cognitive scientist in the research community. To stand, Canute-like, against this evidence is to put at risk all of the many hard-won victories of the whole language movement.”

I wrote these words six years ago. What the many recent legislative actions across North America reflect is that the evidence has indeed begun to fall on our heads. Yet we still have prominent reading educators, publications, and in-service providers traveling the country promulgating views of the reading process that directly contradict what the research says.

To my mind, one of the saddest aspects of the Reading Wars is that they have fostered internecine conflicts *within* the political left. If one didn't know better, one might think that there is tacit collusion going on between the whole language movement and the reactionary right in the United States and Canada.

Here, for example, is a sequence that was carried out with depressing regularity in the 1990s.

1. Whole language proponents advocate a model of the reading process that is at variance with the scientific data.
2. Whole language proponents link that model with the aspects of whole language philosophy that are legitimately good and upon which virtually no researchers disagree.
3. Reactionary forces point to the evidence that the model of reading is incorrect and use the lack of professionalism implied by educators' failure to respond to evidence to justify an agenda of educational cutbacks, privatization, union busting, and teacher bashing.

The unfortunate point here is that the lack of professionalism is *real*. A grade 1 teacher who is unaware of the importance of phonological awareness in reading or of the importance of explicit code instruction for some children is either acting in an unprofessional manner or has been trained by faculty members in schools of education who are not basing practice on established scientific knowledge.

Ironically, the primary casualties of the Reading Wars are disadvantaged children who are not immersed in a literate environment and who are not taught the alphabetic code — precisely the children that progressive forces most want to aid. The research has shown that a very efficient way to generate large social class differences in reading is to implement an extreme whole language curriculum that shortchanges the explicit teaching of spelling-sound relationships.

In short, when explicit teaching of the components of the alphabetic code is shortchanged in early reading instruction, the middle-class children end up reading fine because they induce the code through their print-rich home environments and/or explicit parental tuition.

The cleavage between progressive social policies and scientific research that the extreme whole language advocates have caused in the field has many negative effects, not the least of which is that it gives right-wing forces a club with which to attack teacher autonomy and progressive educational reforms.

It certainly gives them a powerful argument to make against allotting increased resources to education. Why spend extra money on things like lower class sizes, say the right-wing ideologues, when university schools of education are inculcating teachers with a model of reading development that does not square with the scientific evidence?

I think that they are wrong — that the question is somewhat of a non sequitur — but nonetheless, the question has powerful resonance with parents and voters. Faculties in schools of education *do* have a lot to answer for. I myself would like to know why they teach an outmoded, 30-year-old notion of a “psycholinguistic guessing game” that has been superseded by modern research (indeed, that was superseded some time ago).

Who is damaged by the whole language disinformation campaign? Interestingly, it is not those on whom the attacks focus — the research scientists. Nor are their research programs in any way threatened.

Who is hurt the most are the teachers who do not have access to the actual scientific information about the reading process, and the children (usually children from economically-deprived backgrounds) who are utterly dependent on teachers to reveal the alphabetic code for them so that they can acquire the tool that will unlock all of their subsequent education: reading.

(Dr. Stanovich is professor of human development and applied psychology at OISE. See our review on page 3.)