"Balanced" Reading Programs ….
What exactly are they?

As awareness of the importance of including structured phonics instruction in early reading programs grows, so the rhetoric surrounding the value of "balanced" reading programs has become more pervasive. Essentially those who claim to support balanced reading programs embrace the notion that we can integrate the best ideas and practices from both whole-language and code-emphasis approaches. This offers teachers the best of both worlds; the focus on reading for meaning embedded in whole-language learning experiences, and the obvious skill development that occurs as a result of a phonics-driven curricula.

Numerous inquiries, conducted both here and overseas, have occurred as a direct result of both poor literacy outcomes and ongoing confusion related to educational research findings and the associated implications for practice. It had been hoped that definitive public statements, following due consideration of the research, would assist in establishing a clear direction. The findings have been absolutely consistent.

*Explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, structured synthetic phonics, vocabulary, reading fluency and reading comprehension strategies provide **all** children with a clear learning advantage, as does associated professional learning for teachers.*

Strong recommendations have been made both here and overseas to ensure that educational policy and practice be brought into accord with the research evidence. Sadly, it is evident that in a great many West Australian schools the recommendations have had little impact on practice. Although the recently released DET scope and sequence documents do reflect the specific recommendations generated by the Western Australian *Literacy and Numeracy Review (2007)*, many teachers have either not adopted them or feel inadequately trained and/or resourced to do so. Instead there is a tendency to simply 'add' some components of phonics instruction to existing programs and approaches (suggesting a 'balance') when this simply results in confusing both teachers and students.

It is recognised that well-structured phonics programs require effective and strong curriculum development. In many ways the curriculum is the central feature of the program (although obviously the quality of teaching determines whether or not it will be delivered successfully). Conversely, in whole-language programs the active learner is seen as central. This, on one level, puts the onus of responsibility (in terms of success or failure) on the child. The teacher's role is to facilitate for the students a learning journey, along which they will make substantive discoveries and exciting connections. If the child deviates from the path or is slow to arrive at their destination (assuming they ever do) it is viewed as an indicator of "individual differences". Of course children do develop differently, but almost without exception children can learn to read and spell accurately if they are provided with evidence-based teaching (McGuinness, 2005; Fletcher, et.al. 2007).

We know that children taught to read using structured synthetic phonics will be a year ahead of controls and national norms initially and will maintain or even add to this advantage over time (Johnston and Watson, 2003; McCardle and Chhabra, 2004).

Rigorous studies of reading instruction support systematic, synthetic phonics in which children are taught sound-symbol correspondences singly, directly, and explicitly. Further, such studies show that children should be taught directly how to blend those sound-spellings (such as the /ch/, /i/, and /ck/ in "chick") until they can decode almost any unknown word. This instruction should be part of, and linked to, a complete instructional program that includes phoneme awareness, repeated oral reading to build fluency, vocabulary development, and guided oral reading to build comprehension.

The reality is that despite extensive research evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of synthetic phonics as well as research evidence that exposes the flaws in whole language ideology; it is still a whole language approach that is encouraged in many primary school classrooms across the State. Whole language ideology continues to under-pin a great many pre-service teaching courses, textbooks for teachers, instructional materials developed for classroom use, recommended practice and policy documents, and frequently the professional context in which teachers work.

A central component of whole-language is that contextual knowledge is the key predictor of good reading, partly because it helps readers cope with our complex orthography, and partly because reading development has been viewed as similar to language development – a "natural" process. Smith and Goodman saw readers as actively predicting their way through text. The reader formed guesses about upcoming content or individual words based on knowledge of the meaning of a text and then sampled the orthographic information to confirm such predictions.

"Skill in reading involves not greater precision, but more accurate first guesses based on better sampling techniques, greater control over language structure, broadened experiences and increased conceptual development" (Goodman, 1976, p. 504).

Many whole language advocates believed (and continue to believe) that readers use multiple cues in the process of word recognition. The cues provided by context (semantics and syntax) are considered as helpful as those provided by orthography. Many teachers have been encouraged to use "miscue" analysis: a system that classifies the causes of oral reading errors as syntactic, semantic, or visual/graphic. The extension of this strategy involves teachers encouraging children to make "best guesses", based on meaning, as they read, even covering up words with pieces of card (or their fingers) and suggesting that students "think about the meaning" and "guess the word". Thinking about the spelling and essentially decoding the word is viewed as a strategy of last resort. There is now overwhelming evidence to show that the prediction model of reading is incorrect. Eye movement studies indicate skilled readers do not use context in place of graphic information (McGuinness, 2005). Numerous studies have shown that use of context for word identification is inefficient and interferes with reading fluency.

Skilled readers can only accurately "predict" one in ten content words using context, and predicting words takes longer that just looking at the word (Gough, 1993).

There are also numerous studies demonstrating that good and poor readers differ not in the use of context to make better predictions, but in the swift and accurate identification of individual words. Those children who rely on decoding as their primary strategy and use a strong knowledge of phoneme-grapheme relationships (phonics) to decode both familiar and

unfamiliar words develop reading accuracy, reading comprehension and reading fluency at a much faster rate and to a much higher level than children who rely on semantic and syntax cues to "guess" both words they have seen before (and forgotten) and new words. Poor readers, spellers and writers are students who guess words by the picture, the first letter/s or the context in which they see the word.

Louisa Moats (2000) suggests that almost every premise advanced by whole-language educators about how reading is learned has been contradicted by scientific investigations. She has summarized the following facts:

- *Learning to read is not a "natural" process. Most children must be taught to read through a structured and protracted process in which they are made aware of sounds and the symbols that represent them, and then learn to apply these skills automatically and attend to meaning.*
- *Our alphabetic writing system is not learned simply from exposure to print. Phonological awareness is primarily responsible for the ability to sound words out. The ability to use phonics and to sound words out, in turn, is primarily responsible for the development of context-free word-recognition ability, which in turn is primarily responsible for the development of the ability to read and comprehend connected text.*
- *Spoken language and written language are very different; mastery of each requires unique skills.*
- *The most important skill in early reading is the ability to read single words completely, accurately, and fluently. (p.5)*

As Michael Pressley (1994), editor of *Educational Psychologist*, has remarked, *"At best, much of whole-language thinking...is obsolete, and at worst, much of it never was well informed about children and their intellectual development…." (p. 215)*

Unfortunately, resistance to change in some quarters has been strong (at times fierce) and influential proponents of whole-language have been reluctant to alter their position in terms of: teaching strategies; the value of whole-language embedded curricula; and, beliefs about how children best learn to read. It appears that some whole-language educators claim there is nothing new to respond to. They suggest that they have *always* advocated teaching both phonics and reading for meaning (comprehension), and thus revision of their understandings about reading is unnecessary. Rather, "balanced" reading programs are encouraged. There is also greater recognition of the importance of phonological processing skills in early reading, but this does not mean that efforts are made to practice or teach them systematically. In some cases teachers are warned that the teaching of phonological skills and structured phonics (although important) can become boring and repetitive. It is therefore useful to teach them as part of a "balanced" reading program.

It is apparent that many "balanced" instructional approaches are based on misunderstandings about reading development. As a consequence they are both poorly conceived and ineffective. It is suggested that the meaning of the passage will drive word recognition and that decoding (using the alphabetic principle) should be deployed as a secondary strategy. Decoding is chosen in the event that context-based guessing has not resulted in the correct word being discovered. One of the most obvious problems with this model, however, is that skilled readers do not rely on context to read words. They recognize them both in and out of context by their

letter-sound correspondences. Using semantic cues or context is not, and should not be taught as, an effective (certainly not the most effective) strategy in word recognition.

Obviously, not all consequences of whole-language ideology have been detrimental; the whole-language approach has also been associated with some extremely worthwhile ideas and sensible strategies such as: understanding the need to engage with text and be an active reader; thinking about the message and meaning of text; encouraging student self-assessment; using an extensive range of classic and contemporary children's literature; reading aloud daily; organizing collaborative groups; and, involving parents and students in literacy activities and homework. The majority of competent educators commonly hold such ideas. They do not derive from whole language and they are not the central components of whole-language ideology. It is important that these ideas and strategies are maintained.

This does not, however, mean that the ideal approach becomes an eclectic combination of whole language and phonics.

Whole-language strategies - by definition - minimize or omit direct, systematic teaching of language structure (phoneme awareness, spelling patterns and rules, grammar, and so forth) in the name of preserving an unbroken focus on reading for meaning. A lot of people who have a casual acquaintance with the research have persuaded themselves that balanced reading instruction means a little of this, a little of that. Take some phonics activities from this program, add plenty of whole-language activities from a different program, and "hey presto" – all bases are covered and everyone is happy.

If we are looking for a balance in reading instruction that includes some of the more successful components of whole language programs alongside highly recommended evidence-based strategies, then current research findings suggest the following:

- All children need explicit, systematic instruction in phonics and exposure to rich literature, both fiction and nonfiction.
- It is important that children receive instruction in structured phonics early in their reading development.
- Attention to vocabulary growth, comprehension strategies, language development, and writing are essential.
- The development of children's interest and pleasure in reading must be maintained as a central focus within any reading program.

All children bring their knowledge of spoken language to the task of both reading and writing. Over time they develop knowledge about the written symbols that are used to represent speech, and the skills necessary to use these effectively. Knowing the difference between *tax* and *tacks*, *pear* and *pair*, or *scared* and *scarred*, or knowing that *boutique* says "booteek," requires language awareness and attention to detail.

Students who are not taught properly are less able to sound out a new word when it is encountered, slower and less accurate at reading whole words, less able to spell, less able to interpret punctuation and sentence meaning, and less able to learn new vocabulary words from reading them in context." (Moats, 2000; p. 24)

The research evidence highlighting the serious flaws in a whole language approach is overwhelming, yet the ideology is still evident in many facets of education practice: in textbooks, instructional materials for classroom use, courses and guidelines for teacher education, and the professional context in which teachers work. As a result, far too many children are struggling to achieve as well as they could be, and others are struggling to achieve at all; even though this failure is largely preventable (Foorman, et. al., 1998). Obviously, not all children are failing. Many children do learn to read, even when they are not taught effectively, and many teachers are teaching reading well. Unfortunately, it is often those children who depend on well-structured and effective instruction the most; including children from low socio-economic status backgrounds, children whose first language is not English, children with learning difficulties and children with learning disabilities, who are the most disadvantaged by the persistent and fierce opposition to evidence-based strategies. In order to deliver reading programs that are both effective and well-balanced we must be guided by actual evidence and not ideology.

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Further Reading:

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