

Teacher Autonomy: Towards “Permanent Truce” in The Reading Wars

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Abstract: Teacher autonomy gets lost in hegemonic power struggles between Phonics and Whole Language. Theory on both sides of The Reading Wars produces inadequate results because theory fails to incorporate local knowledge. Teachers either need Phonics and Whole Language to share the conceptual space called ‘literacy’ or teachers need to be free to bring both theories to bear on instructional practice. When what researchers tell teachers comes across as mixed messages or half the story, theorists need to turn the issue over to practitioners to settle ideological debate in empirical terms. While teacher autonomy may not end The Reading Wars at the theoretical level, it may help create conditions for permanent truce between Phonics and Whole Language at the level of practice.

Literacy plays a fundamental role in educational aspects of student development and begins in early childhood. There has been an ongoing argument on how to approach English Language Arts using two conceptualizations of the process of learning to read: Phonics and Whole Language. The debate over these specific methods is known as The Reading Wars. Courses using Phonics have been associated with repetitive types of structural reading, memorizing sound, and associating sound to shape of a letter. These tasks are typically completed through less appealing rote learning resources. Unlike Phonics, the method of Whole Language offers little structure in building comprehension of sounds associated with letters. Rather, Whole Language highlights natural forms of communication using oral methods to engage student interest in pursuing reading levels individually. School districts typically mandate use of either Phonics or Whole Language but never together or at the same time. However, if the overarching goal is to ensure student success reflected in state examinations, then we must ask ourselves: Why are teachers prohibited any type of autonomy in determining how to use Phonics in conjunction with Whole Language and why should they be required to only teach one of these? A solution to this situation is to encourage teachers to use both methods in the classroom to facilitate instructor ability to enhance student learning in literacy. The outcome of this would greatly impact how English Language Arts is being directed within the educational system and could eventually result in ending The Reading Wars by partitioning, along meta-theoretical lines, the academic territory of literacy instruction.

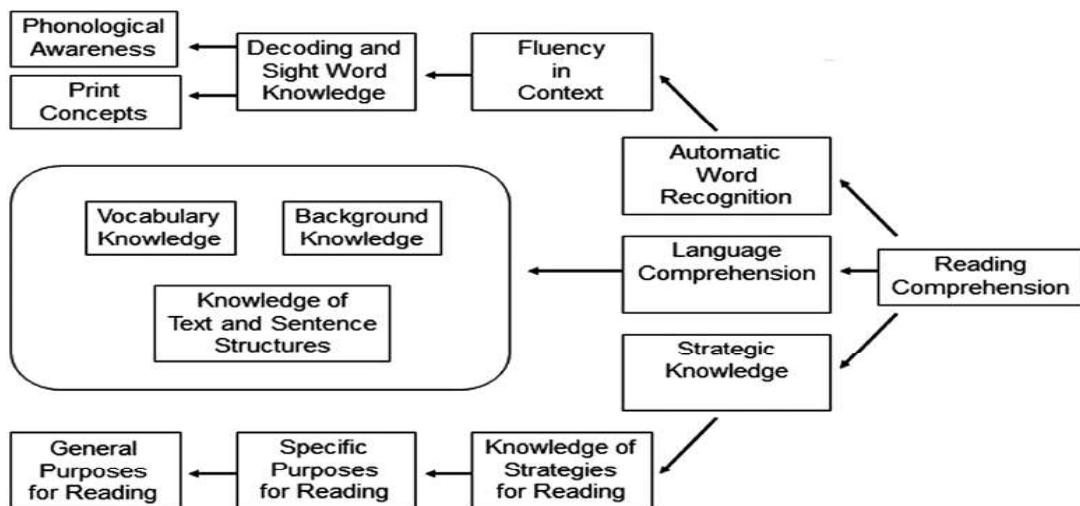
The Reading Wars in Historical Perspective

Strauss (2018) suggests what we nowadays call “The Reading Wars,” a debate still raging among theorists of literacy which pits the “Science of Reading” or Phonics against “Balanced Literacy” or Whole Language, may reach as far back as the 1800s. Horace Mann, known as the Father of American Public Schools, advised against initiating reading instruction by teaching the alphabet as a phonetic code of sounds associated with letters. Instead of this traditional approach to the teaching of reading, Mann favored teaching beginning readers how to identify whole words first and then teaching them the component parts of those words. But systematic statement of the phonics approach to reading instruction did not come to fruition until more than a century after Mann with the 1955 publication of *Why Johnny Can’t Read and What You Can Do About It*

by Rudolf Flesch. Flesch criticized the American school system for *not* teaching phonics to beginning readers and found in this failure the source of reading inability in American public-school students. Central to Flesch’s argument was the claim that written language was an accomplishment of humans different from achievement of oral language, with orality educed from innate vocalizations and literacy produced as inculcated responses to sets of symbols. Opposition to phonics finally found equally systematic treatment in Ken Goodman’s 1986 publication of *What’s Whole in Whole Language?* Goodman conceived use of written language as just as “natural” as oral communication and emphasized the necessity of immersing students in the meaningfulness of reading rather than instructing them in mechanical processes such as letter and word recognition. By the 1990s these two theories of reading instruction had become diametrically opposed to one another. Theorists of literacy instruction increasingly either prioritized phonics “first, fast, and only” (Review of Education, 2022, 1) or emphasized sentence-level information virtually to the exclusion of word-level information in literacy instruction (MacKay, et al., 2021). Battle lines were being drawn in what has become known as The Reading Wars (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

The Reading Wars in Ideological Perspective

Systematic Phonics is also referred to as Synthetic Phonics, but often is simply directly referenced as Phonics. The teaching objective of phonics is the study of the alphabetic code in which students first encounter reading instruction through identifying shape and sounds of letters to make a whole word. This course of study engages students through understanding the purpose of each letter to produce syntactic awareness in forming sentence structures (MacKay et al., 2021). Study of the alphabetic code features exposures to specific rules and guidelines on how the alphabet is applicable in formulating sentences and associating words to meaning. Stahl & McKenna (2019) have articulated a model of the phonics approach to literacy instruction for reading comprehension:



This design of literacy incorporates objective elements of systematic phonics and examines the approach in assessing reading instruction on how to strategically extend these concepts to determine how students will selectively utilize phonemic awareness in reading. What is to be

said about Phonics is that it is a necessary practice to incorporate in literacy instruction. In its constructs, it holds formal and informal elements of reading that persist throughout cognitive stages of development as a reader learns to function more fully in society. Despite criticism of Systematic Phonics from a Whole Language perspective, studies have measured significant gains by students of syntactic awareness and reading comprehension across the elementary years, especially in the areas of word reading, phonological awareness, verbal working memory, and other areas of the mechanics and technicalities of literacy (MacKay et al., 2021). Systematic Phonics seems to facilitate the integration of three major components of literacy: automatic word recognition, language comprehension, and strategic knowledge (Lee, 2012).

Whole Language (also referred to as Balanced Literacy) theorists point out the insufficiency of Systematic Phonics: “The logic of phonics instruction is that letters can be coded as sounds or sounds as letters. These can be blended to produce reading and writing. But that doesn’t produce meaningful language – it only produces strings of sounds or letters,” (Goodman, 1986, p. 11). Also, as Phonics became associated with pedagogical practices of repetitive drills of decodable texts often unrelated to the interests or cultural diversity of students, it became seen as a method of instruction that did not allow children to make day-to-day connections to the significance of learning how to read. On the contrary, evidence provided by linguists and child psychologists argues against teaching literacy in separate parts via drills. Rather, from the perspective of Whole Language, best practices to develop literacy involve the use of stimulating reading and engaging students in discussion about texts meaningful to them (Peterson, 2021). Often Whole Language theorists contend this approach emphasizes the natural oral components of language vital to enhancing how children navigate and utilize communication in literacy. It is a strategy for educating children to read, not through phonemic awareness, but through identifying how some system of language contributes to creating or making meaning (Morin, 2021). Here is a model of the Whole Language approach (Pembelajaran, 2013):



This practice theorizes significance in engaging literacy by encouraging non-systematic instruction executed through relatable examples in a variety of “real” books (texts not specifically designed to facilitate any type of literary guidance) that range across genres (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022). The general idea behind using these methodologies is to have teachers use literature as a resourceful teaching tool to provide students opportunities to recognize whole words rather than sounding out each individual word. On the Whole Language approach, the formation of literacy arises from everyday purposes of making lists or writing notes rather than having to understand the alphabetic code or how to decode words (Morin, 2021). Ultimately, Whole Language erects structural systems of making meaning through utilizing word functions correlating to real-life contexts of language use (Reading Horizons, 2022). This validates practical language use in real-life contexts by incorporating into literacy instruction scenarios about what the children are experiencing in the world around them. Ideally, this creates the essential goal of developing intrinsic motivation to learn literacy effectively.

The Reading Wars in Comparative Perspective

Perhaps the biggest observable difference in the models is that Phonics uses individual arrows to describe the process of attaining reading comprehension and Whole Language uses interlinked circles to tie together the elements of their model of reading comprehension. This reflects an essential difference between the two theories: Phonics sees literacy development as a causal process vs. Whole Language sees literacy as an emergent process. Yaden, et al. (2021) argue correctly that this is not enough to make them incompatible with one another. Instead, it opens up the possibility of seeing Phonics and Whole language as complementary and mutually supportive of one another. When Whole Language and Phonics work together our idea of ‘literacy’ expands. We can see literacy as a kind of learning that involves both causal and emergent processes. No surprise then that both views are able to cite convincing evidence for their positions and equally convincing evidence against the other. Each studies its own separate ideas and finds the competing theory inadequate to ideas it was never meant to deal with. How we view Phonics and Whole Language, as either contradictory or complementary, makes a fundamental and far-reaching difference to instructional practice. If the theories are complementary, teachers need to know how to use both to make the most of literacy instruction. So, it becomes important to find out what is keeping teachers from being able to use both approaches in their quest for student success.

The Debilitating Politics of Standardizing Methods of Literacy Instruction

Certainly, multiple factors prohibit the development of unifying solutions in any problematic situation. But in the case of The Reading Wars political agendas play a major role in shaping and carrying on the struggle. Media presentation of The Reading Wars has tended towards the portrayal of the two approaches as mutually exclusive of one another and led to the development of vested interests among professional, business, commercial, and parental lobbying groups advocating privileged use of only one approach or the other (Soler, 2016). Advocacy of this kind has, to make matters worse, led to pendulum swings between which approach has dominance at any given time in any given place depending on who has most recently won the lobbying competition (Pearson, 2004). Swings in pedagogical policy and practice have led, in turn, to charges of inconsistency and contradiction in literacy policy and practice (David, 2020). Under such circumstances, teachers feel frustration and resentment at district-wide dismissal of their experienced-based knowledge about how young children learn to read (Adcock, 2001).

A politics of opposition played out in an educational system increasingly reliant on standardization of instruction has inhibited teachers from being able in the contexts in which they teach to offer timely provision of necessary resources from both Phonics and Whole Language to effectively carry out literacy instruction. Forces pushing schooling towards standardization of teaching include mandated high-stakes accountability tests and demand for continuity in technological developments affecting teaching. All educators are part of formal institutions, regardless of the subject being taught, and, as such, are constantly tasked by overarching policies to measure developmental growth of students against set-in-stone standards designed (1) to verify which students were most likely able to meet the objectives in the assessment and (2) to verify which of those objectives would require more practice (Dewitz & Graves, 2021). Although standardized benchmarks can help to facilitate the quality of what is being learned and/or to evaluate students who will need support, the problem lies in systematizing how instruction is being executed at scale among a widely diverse populace of learners.

Forces tending towards standardization of literacy instruction find pushback in underlying social justice issues that have been brought forth due to analyses in performance results of standardized instruction. MacPhee, et al. (2021) find a source of these issues in the fact that reports on literacy research often assert an impossibly direct connection between basic research and instructional practice. Without sufficient translational research that attends to a variety of instructional contexts and student populations, standardized instruction may perpetuate inequities. Inequities would much less likely be a result of literacy instruction if the Phonics/Whole Language debate were reframed in terms of conversation and collaboration rather than challenge and conflict. Goldberg and Goldenberg (2022) wisely suggest that moving forward to a demilitarized approach to literacy instruction will require marshaling the combined resources of both researchers and practitioners. Important in this process will be diffusing national curriculum policy into centers of control at much more local levels where pedagogy and assessment can be tailored to specific populations of young readers (Wyse & Bradbury, 2022).

Transformative Literacy Instruction for Meta-Theoretical Reconciliation

Local control of literacy instruction, understood as teachers in classrooms engaged with students who together make mutually agreeable decisions about group and individual literacy needs and interests, may be the most direct and least arduous path to the non-binary, relational meta-theoretical reframing of The Reading Wars recently called for by Yaden, Reinking, and Smagorinsky (2021). However, attempting to reframe The Reading Wars conceptual battle by conceptual battle, as Yaden and his co-authors suggest, risks intensifying fighting around specific issues at the expense of reaching rapprochement on general principles. Rather than teasing out and working through the set of binary oppositions currently characterizing thinking about literacy, literacy theory may be best served by giving both Phonics and Whole Language the best run for their money where they are supposed to have their greatest impact: the classroom (Harrison, 1999). Examples of instructional activity at a variety of levels — systemic, classroom, and individual teacher personal-professional development — indicate how this process may run.

Burnett (2007) points out, that for all practical purposes, Waldorf-Steiner schools long ago resolved the issue at the heart of The Reading Wars. Instead of thinking of literacy as involving two incompatible approaches to reaching the single goal of reading comprehension, Waldorf schools encompass both Phonics and Whole Language into literacy educations by teaching two separate subjects: Reading/Writing and Spelling. Burnett makes the promising suggestion that

systematic study of literacy instruction in Waldorf schools will provide insight into how combatants in The Reading Wars may better understand how to disentangle the threads of their respective theories. The suggestion is promising because Waldorf schools seem on the face of things to provide a context of study relatively bias-free of prior theoretical commitment to either side in The Reading Wars. However, even on less neutral testing grounds study of teacher use of the two theories is possible. For example, Connor, Morrison & Katch (2004) studied how patterned instructional activities predicted growth in first-grade students' decoding ability. They found four important trends. First, students with low, initial decoding scores benefitted most from explicit decoding practice managed by the teacher. Second, students with high, initial decoding scores showed no growth from explicit decoding practice. Third, children with initially low vocabulary scores initially benefitted more from teacher explicit instruction, but as their vocabulary improved, they transitioned to instruction more student-led and implicit. Fourth, students with initially high vocabulary scores saw their decoding scores go up most when they experienced student-led, implicit instruction. In the first-grade contexts in which Connor, et al., did their study teachers needed to be responsive to student literacy needs to make students better at decoding. Some students needed phonics first. Some students were already meaningfully reading. Along that range, each student needed the teacher to use the right mix of Phonics and Whole Language. The findings of the Connor study coincide with Shirley A. Carson's (1999, p. 222) description of her growth as a literacy teacher over a multi-year career. Wading into the reading wars while an instructor in the Department of Education at East Central University, Carson offered three conclusions drawn from her experience as a literacy teacher: 1. In The Reading Wars, "the pendulum always swings too far in each direction." ... "2. Teachers must go through stages of constructing their own learning. [and] 3. We need to be teacher-researchers who assess and document how students learn best." A multiverse of students requires a multidimensional reconstruction of literacy curriculum at the classroom level.

The key to integrating Systematic Phonics and Whole Language is not new research, or a new idea, or even a meta-hypothesis to support claims on how both theories complement each other. Rather, the key to integrating the two approaches to literacy instruction is providing educators the autonomy to use both effectively. Unlike theorists who may see ideas as concepts competing over hegemonic sovereignty, teachers are more likely to see theories as tools, as recommended methodologies for achieving desired goals with students. Any skillful craftsperson will want a well-stocked tool bench and understandably will become mystified if told to use only half of the tools on the bench that will be needed to get the job done. Theorists of literacy have reached an impasse from which to move forward they must give way for teachers of literacy to work out in actual processes of literacy instruction details of the relation between Phonics and Whole Language. New developments in literacy theory are still welcome; but must be put in the hands of teachers as tools to employ to determine their usefulness. A permanent truce of this sort, in which theorists on both sides of the war agree to turn their ideas over to teachers for the final test, may allow the fog of war to clear sufficiently to support more permanent reconciliation via more precise (re)mapping of the territory over which The Reading Wars are being fought.

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