

Understanding the Teaching of Reading: Observing Best Practices

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**Senior Honors Project
May 7, 2003**

Introduction:

I have loved to read all my life, but it took volunteering at an inner city school to realize the real importance of reading. I saw students who did not read anywhere near their grade level who struggled in every subject. I realized that reading holds the key to success in school. Children deserve every opportunity to love reading and become successful readers. I wondered how teachers facilitate this. What different methods do teachers use to help children learn to read? I read several books about different theories of reading instruction and strategies. After reading these, I felt even more confused about how to teach reading. There seemed to be two prevalent approaches regarding how to teach reading: whole language and phonics. This project looks at the best practices within these approaches that teachers use in real classrooms and the research supporting them.

Methodology:

I read two central volumes, *Understanding Reading* (Smith 1978) and *Beginning to Read* (Adams 1990). The following section lays out the central arguments of both authors. Frank Smith, in *Understanding Reading* (1978), lays out some of the principles of the whole language approach. Smith emphasizes the importance of the experience that learners have with text. For example, students must understand how a text works. They learn schemes naturally for reading stories and grasp how authors organize narrative (Smith 1978). Smith also focuses on meaningful experiences with texts, as opposed to drills and worksheets that do not require students to really read and comprehend (Smith 1978). Teachers provide these meaningful experiences by allowing students time to read books of their interest and using the commercial print like familiar signs, for example, McDonald's signs and interstate or road signs the students see everyday. Smith believes that a reading teacher ought "to ensure that children have

adequate demonstrations of reading being used for evident meaningful purposes and to help children fulfill them for themselves." (Smith 1978)

Whole language does not rely on teaching rules for sounds of letters and letter combinations. Students learn these principles of phonics with meaningful experiences with text. Teachers do not have to teach them as rules but rather than introduce them to patterns. For example, showing a child words that begin like mom, with an "m" when one reads aloud, begins to help attune the ears to the similarities of the beginning sounds in monkey, money, me, and may.

Smith states children have more difficulty reading when they focus only on getting a word correct rather than understanding the text (Smith 1978). He suggests teaching novice readers three ways to deal with words not known: skip and come back, guess or predict, or decide from spelling (Smith 1978). Phonics rules do not always help the child to read the word. They contain many exceptions. For example, the sound of the letter "c" can be pronounced as a hard or a soft "c" like in the words cat and circus. Another example can be seen in the many pronunciations of the spelling of the phoneme "sh" which include "sh," "tion," "ient," "ial," "ion," and "ious."

Whole language deals with teaching children to read whole words and combination of words rather than letters. Children must see words in context rather than be taught words individually. For example, a child who has strong associations with a cat or a dog and looks to stories about a cat or dog, soon learns how to read the word for the pet. Smith also believes that we organize everything in schemas and connect information through these schemas. This makes it important to help students connect things they read with their lives (Smith 1978).

Smith does advocate acquiring sight words. Children cannot decode these words using phonics, instead they must memorize them. Some examples of these are

the, was, is, and are. The more words children can identify the more they can remember and utilize reading strategies (Smith 1978).

Smith outlines some conditions for a good reading classroom. Teachers should provide meaningful reading material of interest, help when needed, and a comfortable environment that allows students to take chances and make mistakes (Smith 1978). He assumes that teachers who teach new readers must, themselves, love to read and have interest in words and syntax (Smith 1978).

Phonics, on the other hand, focuses on the sounds or phonemes associated with individual letters and combinations of letters. In *Beginning to Read* (1990), Marilyn Adams lays out the importance of teaching phonics and what students gain from it. She emphasizes the importance of assessing students' phonemic awareness. These include:

- phonic segmentation tasks (i.e. the word bat perceived as three separate sounds: buh-a-t)
- phoneme manipulation tasks (the student is given "bat" to change the first sound and substitute for another making a different word)
- syllable splitting tasks (bat – first sound is buh)
- blending tasks (putting together three phonemes to make meaningful words like buh, a, t =bat)
- oddity tasks (student is given bat, mat, cat and but, in order find the one that does not fit)

Each task assumes the student can break apart words to analyze the sounds of different letters (Adams 1990). Students who can accomplish these tasks upon entering school find success more often (Adams 1990). The ability to recognize spelling patterns in words helps students to improve their decoding skills. Adams also emphasizes these other skills: recognizing a set of sight words that can not be decoded using phonemic

principles (i.e. the, this, of, on, to, and), knowledge of nursery rhymes (Jack and Jill), and meaningful experiences with words (kids need to be read to; acknowledge commercial print). Phonics based instruction considers rhyming an important skill for pre-reading. Students who can rhyme can read. By exposing students to lots of words in commercial print like billboards and signs, the print holds meaning and students will learn it better.

Adams does not encourage teachers to teach students to skip words they do not know, but to teach them to look at the word carefully. She says children who encounter words they do not know often within a text need an easier text (Adams 1990).

Reading about these different approaches to teaching reading brought several questions to my attention. What strategy of instruction is best? Does a best strategy even exist? What do teachers do in real classrooms? What do students do in reading and writing instruction? Observing first and second grade classrooms in different school systems seemed a good way to answer these questions. Through these observations, I wanted to observe “best” practices that I had read about, what strategies and practices do teachers use, and which ones they do not use. I wanted to see what their students do in their reading and writing instruction. I wanted to see which strategies produce results and work in real classrooms.

I set up appointments with seven classrooms in four different school systems to observe their reading classes. I went to these classrooms looking for evidence of print, what strategies the teachers use in reading and writing instruction, and how students respond.

Findings:

The classrooms visited can be divided into three categories: phonics based, whole language based and a mix of the two. Each of these categories contain distinct characteristics to identify them.

Phonics Based Classrooms

Three out of the seven classrooms visited could be considered phonics-based classrooms. These classrooms included two second grade classes and one first grade class. They were also part of three different schools systems.

The trademark characteristics of a phonics-based classroom include the emphasis on the sounds or phonemes associated with letter and combinations of letters and explicit teaching of the rules. Several teachers observed use child-like rules and tricks to help the students to remember the rules. In a second grade class visited, to help the students remember what sound "ou" makes, the teacher asks them what they would say if she pinched them. Other rules include "when two vowels go a walking the first one does the talking." To help students remember that in "ay" only the "a" is heard, a teacher said the "y" just kept the "a" company while the "a" did all the work. One teacher uses the idea that sometimes all your vowels are girls and the consonants are boys and boys do not say as much as the girls to help her students with words where the vowel sounds are more pronounced than the consonant sounds.

These classroom teachers use different programs for teaching phonics rules. The C.A.R.E. program lays out which phonics rule the first grade teacher should teach at the time and how to teach it and also includes a handwriting component. The teachers present the skills sequentially and the students practice them until they become automatic. It incorporates a lot of testing of the students. The teachers give the students a test at the beginning of the year to see how many words they can decode and how many sounds of letters and letter combinations they know. The teachers then give the test at the end of the year to measure the students' progress. The day I observed, students took an evaluation on short "a", short, "i" and short "u." The students decode a list of nineteen words with these short vowels. As a class, they review the first couple of words. The students identify the vowel, say what sound the vowel makes, sound out the

word, and then read it quickly. After they go over the first few as a class, the teacher calls on individual students. Most of the words follow the pattern, but there are a couple thrown in that do not. The students take this evaluation weekly on the phonics skill learned the week before. This program is based on one designed for students with special needs and learning disabilities, but the school system applies it to all the students.

In these classrooms, the basal reading series plays an important role in the reading classroom. A lot of these series lay out for the teacher a plan for reading and writing for the whole week. Several of the school systems visited use the Scott Foresman Reading series. This series incorporates phonics, grammar, reading skills, writing skills and spelling into one program. The series usually comes with several workbooks for grammar, reading, phonics, and spelling. The school system encourages the teachers to use these books for their classrooms. The teachers use worksheets frequently in these classrooms. They usually have the student practice some skill like how to changing "y" to "i" when adding endings on words. These worksheets require the student to remember and practice the rules taught.

Some of the teachers use the plan laid out exactly by the teacher's manual without incorporating their own ideas and plans. These plans account for a lot of phonemic awareness and emphasize skills in a sequenced coverage of the topics. The basal provides a phonics poem for each week that several of the classes used. This poem, set to music, focuses on a phonics skill and a grammar skill. One classroom observed looks at letter combinations "or", "ore", "oor", and "our" in the poem "Doris and Boris." They discuss that all the combinations of the phonemes make the same sound. Another example, the poem "My Pals" looks at short "a" sounds and blends like "sh," "tch," "ch," and "wh." The phonics poem helps the students with rhythm and rhyme, two important skills in a phonics based classroom.

Most phonics-based classrooms rely heavily on teaching students to sound out the words that students do not know rather than skip them or use context clues to figure them out. In whole group reading, most of the phonics based classes read aloud in a round robin. Every student has a turn reading aloud in round robin reading, and it usually goes in some kind of order. When the students come to a word they find difficult to read, the teacher reminds them of the phonics rules and hints. In a second grade class observed, the teacher instructs the student to look for smaller words within the word and think about the rules. For example, when a student comes to the word "tripped", the teacher first tells the student to cover up the "ed" and then look at the word. She then prompts the student to sound out the "t" with a short or long "i". Once the student decides whether the vowel sounds short or long, the student reads the word. This continues throughout the story with every word that the students do not know. The teacher never tells the students a word unless it is a sight word.

Sight words and vocabulary hold importance in these classes. In all the classrooms, the teachers review a list of vocabulary words before starting the story. For example, in a second grade class the teacher writes the words on the board and calls on students to read them. If the student does not know the word, she gives them clues to help. She tells them to look for smaller words or "baby words," as she calls them. If the student still can not read the word, they look for endings to take off the words and then the teacher asks the student if the vowel sounds short or long. Once the student reads the word, they use the word in a sentence or give an example. Most of the classes observed use the workbook to practice their vocabulary words. One class creates a flipbook to review or practice the words. They write the word on the front flap and then write a sentence using the word underneath it. They practice the vocabulary all week and then the students take a test on it at the end of the week. In the test, the students fill in the blanks with the correct word.

I only observed reading groups in one of the classrooms visited. The other classes did not use many reading groups in their instructional time in reading. The classroom that has reading groups uses the leveled readers provided by the basal reading book. The publishers divide the books into three different levels: easy, average, and advanced. The teachers divide the students into leveled groups like the books. In the classroom observed, the students experience some mobility within these groups. The stories are an extension of the skill taught for the week. In one class visited, they focus on short "a" and blends for the week so the stories to read contain words with these components. The story also has a reading comprehension skill that it focuses on. The skill for the week might be drawing conclusions. The story will contain a situation or character that makes it easy for the student to draw conclusions about depending on the level of the reader. The easy and average books change every week while the advanced book lasts for the whole unit. This book also contains some fun activities for the students to complete that go along with the book theme.

The students in these classrooms actively participate in the class. They learn to decode words by sounding them out and using tricks to remember the phonics rules. The students read books and stories on their level in their classwork. They usually read aloud rather than silently to themselves in whole group reading. They do some small projects like flipbooks but mostly do worksheets and workbook pages in these classes. They also learn to break apart and manipulate sounds and letter combinations.

The teachers in these classrooms offer a variety of activities. Some of the teachers follow a plan laid out exactly by the basal reader adding none of their own ideas. Others follow the plan but include some of their own curriculum design. The first grade teacher has the students create a flipbook using the vocabulary words from a story rather than the workbook page. The teachers instruct students to use tricks and

rules to help figure out the words they do not know. They encourage students to continue reading and praise them for the reading they have accomplished.

Whole Language classrooms

Out of the seven classrooms visited two can be considered whole language emphasis, one first grade and one second grade classroom. These classrooms are in the same school system. Whole language classrooms stress the experience students have with text. Students in these classes read a lot of different kinds of text and have much more choice in what they read. These teachers see experiences with lots of different kinds texts as key to learning to read and developing a love for reading.

These classrooms provide a print rich environment. In these classrooms, teachers label things to give students more exposure to words. In a first grade classroom visited, the teacher labels the door, cubbies, board, teacher's desk, library, computers, clock, and other items in the room. The classroom offers constant exposure to print for the students. Whole language classrooms display lots of print in their rooms for constant exposure for students. Both classrooms visited contain word walls. The teacher displays a list of words for the students to know. Students usually encounter these words in reading vocabulary or sight words. They give students a whole wall of words to learn and exposure to these words daily. It also gives the students a resource for when they write sentences or stories and do not know how to spell a word.

The two classrooms observed also had libraries where the students could choose books to read. The first grade teacher created a library for the students out of gutters that someone donated. This enables her to display all the books available to the student in a way where they can see the cover of the book. She exchanges the books every few weeks and includes magazines and newspapers. She believes this has increased student motivation for reading. The teacher also previews the books before

placing them on the shelves. This might involve reading the book aloud or just telling the students about the books when she places these in the library.

The other classroom uses a bookshelf for a library. The students can choose from a variety of books of all levels for their silent sustained reading. This is a very important part of the day in a whole language classroom because it gives students a chance to read what they enjoy. If students read what interests them they enjoy reading more. This particular teacher sets aside thirty minutes everyday for students to choose their own book to read. The teacher uses this time to work with students individually on reading by having the students read aloud to her. The students seem to enjoy reading aloud to someone. The teacher's aide in this room also makes herself available for the students to read to.

Whole group reading in a whole language classroom focuses on reading and comprehending the text rather than getting every word correct. The students read the basal reading story chorally. The teacher does not single out any one student for reading aloud. The teacher frequently reads aloud during whole group reading. This teacher uses this time to teach some reading comprehension skills through a trade book. The teacher might choose a theme and then introduce books about the theme. The first grade teacher chose the theme of teddy bears because the teddy bear celebrated its hundredth birthday the week I visited the class. The teacher reads aloud the book *The Teddy Bear's Picnic*. While reading the book, she talks about several different concepts. She talks about rhyming within the story, what six o'clock would look like on a clock, and even talks about the real bears in the National Park nearby. This helps the students to create a schema for the book and relate it to something they already know, an important concept to Frank Smith in *Understanding Reading*.

Teachers do not explicitly teach phonics rules to the students and do not require the students to do worksheets to practice them. The students read constantly and eventually pick up on the phonics rules without the teacher teaching them.

The second grade classroom uses trade books also to base their writing on. The teacher read the book *Best Friends* by Steven Kellogg and they wrote their own story about their best friend. Writing has an integral role in this classroom. The students write everyday for forty minutes. They constantly publish their own work and share their work with the class. The teacher creates an environment conducive to this kind of sharing. The students do not criticize each other when they share their writing but encourage each other. This helps to create an environment where students feel comfortable enough to take risks in their learning.

They also use the book to talk about some skills needed for comprehension like prediction. While reading an interesting story that the students enjoy, the teacher asks questions about what will happen next or asks the students to describe the main character. These questions help the students to develop into good readers and allow them to acquire the skills through their experience with a good book they enjoy.

The teachers in these classrooms organize their room around centers like reading, writing, math, exploring and computer centers. The reading center consists of a comfortable place in the room for the student to curl up with a good book. In one of the classrooms, the teacher set up a beanbag chair and a rocking chair for the students to use for reading. This shows the students the importance of reading and gives them a special place to read for pleasure. The centers usually try to integrate curriculum, which involves bringing in trade books on all subjects. The math center might have a book that involves the concept discussed for the week. For example, time was the topic the week I visited and the center involved the book called *The Grouchy Ladybug*. This book showed the day of a grouchy ladybug trying to pick a fight. It incorporated time and reading

clocks into the story. The writing center might have a book for the children to model their writing after and the exploring center might have a science or social studies book in it.

Reading groups in these classes follow a guided reading strategy, which give students books they can read and reread. The students read the books to themselves until the teacher asks the students to read parts of it aloud to her. Teachers can use this time to evaluate students' progress with no real pressure. During these reading times, teachers encourage students to skip words they do not know or look at the context of the word before trying to sound the word out. Teachers also teach the students to look at the pictures for clues. They emphasize learning sight words and telling students words they do not know rather than requiring the student to sound the word out. When students are stuck on a word it disrupts their fluency and interferes with comprehension, which is the point of reading. Before they read the book the group takes a picture walk and discusses what might be going on in the story by looking at the pictures. The teachers use trade books on the students' levels for these groups. The students have mobility within the group and teachers use running records frequently to assess the student's progress.

The reading environment holds importance in whole language classrooms. The environment should be a place that encourages all kinds of reading and exposes the students to many different kinds of print. The first grade class observed had a subscription to *Time* magazine for kids. The magazine contains only a page but it exposes the students to new medium for print. They learn how a magazine works which leads to learning to read a magazine. Classroom libraries provide books of all different levels so students can have the option to read a more difficult book if they choose and not feel ashamed if they choose a book on lower level. It is important for students to feel safe in their school environment in taking risks with their education in a whole language classroom.

The Mixed Classrooms:

Two of the classes visited use a mix of phonics and whole language strategies. These classrooms are from two different school systems and one is a first grade and one a second grade classroom. These classes use more whole language strategies than phonics based but still incorporate phonics skills.

The mixed classrooms also expose children to lots of different kinds of print in the room. The classes also contain word walls and posters, that expose children to lots of different words. One class has a lot of teacher-made posters about reading and writing. For example one poster contains about twenty different journal topics for the students to choose from when writing. Another poster gives the student strategies for what to do when they get to a word they do not know when reading. Other posters display phonics hints on them to help the students in the classroom. One poster shows what sounds long and short vowels make, and one shows key words to help remember how to decode blends. The first grade class contains lots of examples of how to do things in the classroom on posters. The teacher provides a poster of a big sheet of notebook paper with the proper way to head a paper. She also uses sentence strips to show different examples of sentences and displays them on the walls.

Students have lots of access to books and reading time in these classrooms. One of the classrooms uses baskets for the books of all levels and topics in a corner of the room the students can chose from. The students can also check themselves out of the room when they have free time to go to the library and check out a book. The first grade classroom has a reading corner, which provides a special place in the room that students can go to read. It is a carpeted area of the classroom with pillows on the floor and lots of books. Some of the books the students read in these classrooms are *Frog and Toad* by Arnold Lobel, *Horrible Harry* by Suzy Kline and *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. The teacher uses handwriting to expose the first

graders to different kinds of print and literature. The teacher chooses a poem for the students to use to practice their handwriting with for the week. This gives students practice with a skill, exposure to new medium, and experience with poetry.

The teacher sets up whole group reading similar to how it is in a whole language emphasis classroom. The students read the story together chorally. They introduce the vocabulary on the carpet at class meeting time. This part of instruction contains some phonetic elements. When the students have trouble reading a word, the teachers prompt the students using some phonics rules. For example, the teacher tells the student to find the base or the root word of grabbed, then asks why they doubled the "b." One student answer that it was because of the rule. The teacher explains the rule, the word has one syllable and a vowel before the last consonant then you double the consonant before adding "-ed." After reviewing the rule the teacher reminds the students that they can always find exceptions to rules and they need to read a lot of words so they know a lot of words.

After reviewing the vocabulary, the students go back to their seats and take a picture walk through the story. As they look at the pictures, they talk about the story and what might happen in it. Before beginning to read the teacher models what good readers look for by saying, "We're going to find out if normal people can play giants, we're going to think about if this is real or fantasy, and we're going to see who wins." During the story, she stops and asks questions to check for comprehension.

Reading groups hold importance in these classrooms. They give the teacher an opportunity to work one on one with a student who needs extra help and lets the teacher know how much progress the students are making. The reading groups observed use trade books that the teacher finds from the book *Guided Reading* by Irene Fountas and Gary Su Pinnell. This book has lists of trade books grouped by reading level based on a running record. The teacher does running records frequently to assess students'

progress or to assess the areas like fluency or comprehension where the student needs to improve.

One group observed reads *Jigsaw Jones- The Case of the Sneakers Sneak* by James Preller. This book reads on a level of 2.5, which is about average for second graders. When the students come over to the group, they show excitement about reading. One student tells the teacher he finished the new *Horrible Harry* book he had just checked out from the library. The students read the chapter to themselves silently working at their own pace. They have highlighter tape they can use to mark things that intrigue them or things they have difficulty with while reading. The teacher taps on the table in front of a student and that student reads aloud to the teacher. The teacher listens and comments. For example, the teacher tells one student that she likes how the student skipped over a name rather than getting hung up on it. While listening, she asks comprehension questions to check for understanding.

In these groups, the teacher reminds students of the different strategies for dealing with a word not known. The teacher encourages the students to use these strategies: sound the word out, skip it and go on, find a part of it you might know, look for picture clues and guess and check to make sure it makes sense. I also observed the lower level reading group. They read *A Bed Full of Cats* by Holly Keller, a picture book. These students also show a lot of excitement about reading. When they finish this book one student says, "I hope the new book we start is a chapter book." One student experiences trouble reading the word "ad." The student reads the word when the teacher asks what sound does short "a" makes, but still has difficulty understanding what the word means. The teacher uses this opportunity to teach a mini lesson on the difference between "add" and "ad." The students can not come up with a definition for an ad without using something they know. She talks about newspaper ads for groceries or sales that

their parents might receive to aid in understanding the concept. This helps to create a schema for the students when they read that word again.

In the mixed classrooms, students write a lot. The teachers emphasize the connections between reading and writing and encourage their students to express themselves. In the first grade classroom, the student write in their journals everyday. The topic on the day I observed was "An ant." The teacher chose bugs as the theme of the week and the students need to complete the sentence and add more sentences of their own. They get the opportunity to share these journals during calendar time. The sharing of their journals causes a lot of excitement for the students and they take great pride in their work. An example of one of the journals is: "An ant is big. An ant is not big. An ant is small. An ant is not small. Is your ant small? Yes, my ant is small." The progress students make in writing can be seen everyday by the sharing of their journals and the daily practice of writing. They write a special journal on Friday that goes in a portfolio of the students' work.

The second grade class holds a writing workshop every day. The students work on several different pieces of writing in different phases. Once they complete a rough draft of story, they make an appointment with the teacher for a conference. During the conference, they talk about punctuation, grammar and story structure. The conference usually involves two students and the students help each other. This teaches the students how to constructively help someone without criticizing. They must say a positive thing about the story. The students write about these topics: Halloween, when I was born, and hobbies. The students can present a final piece at the end of the writing workshop time. They must call on two students to: tell something they like, ask a question, and give a suggestion.

Teachers use a mix of the basal and trade books. They use the basal for whole group reading but they supplement it through the week with trade books. In the first

grade classroom, the students spend the whole week on one story from the basal reader. Their weekly schedule consists of: Monday they read the basal story, Tuesday read a trade book, Wednesday they read the basal story again, then Thursday they read another trade book that focuses on a phonetic skill, and Friday they can read which ever story they like the best. The teachers also read aloud to the students in both of these classrooms everyday before going home.

Teachers in these classrooms still teach phonics rules explicitly but they also emphasize that they might find it difficult to decode every word using phonetic rules. The students do not practice these skills using worksheets. In the first grade the focus of the week was buggy blends. They would read about bugs and talk about blends. The students write a sentence everyday about a different bug using a different blend in the sentence. The students get the practice with the skill while also practicing writing and seeing the skill in use. The students write the sentence "An ant can crawl" for the first day as a model of what the teacher expects of them the rest of the week. The students say the sound that "cr" in crawl makes and then circle the blend with a crayon. The teacher displays these on the wall. I noticed also that one of these schools systems uses the same Scott Foresman series that has the phonics poem but the teacher chooses not to use the poem to explicitly teach the phonics skill. In this classroom, the teacher does not explicitly teach phonics often. The teacher mentions the rules in passing but does not teach a lesson on them.

The first grade teacher set up her classroom and lessons around centers and integrated curriculum. She uses the basal to help think of a theme for the week and then brings in trade books to supplement the theme. The theme "buggy blends" integrates science, reading, phonics, and spelling. The centers for the week have to do with bugs and blends. The reading center had more books about bugs and books that had lots of

blends in them. The science center focuses on bugs and had ladybugs for the students to observe.

The reading environment in these classes helps students to feel comfortable. They share their writing frequently without experiencing ridicule. They receive new experiences with text that makes them excited about reading new books. Although the teachers use some phonics strategies, they use whole language techniques the majority of the time.

Discussion:

In Defense of Good Teaching (1998) Kenneth Goodman compiles articles written concerning the "reading wars" going on across the nation. Reading these essays brought several issues to my attention. The reading wars include the battles between those who want reading to be taught by a phonics emphasis approach and those who want reading to be taught using whole language emphasis approach. These people are not teachers but politicians, religious leaders, and government officials. Most of these people are not directly involved in elementary education and real classrooms.

One issue that I was not familiar with was the religious and political implications of teaching reading a certain way. Religious groups emphasize the need to teach reading through phonics because of the need for people to read the Bible to gain access to the values of Christianity. Phonics does not emphasize experiences with lots of different kinds of text - it just emphasizes sounds. Some groups fear the knowledge and ideas that lots of text and print bring to people. The political argument against phonics, according to Goodman, involves a movement against the public school system. He contends that some conservative political organizations want to privatize education and eliminate public education. The movement against whole language represents just one component of the movement (Goodman 1998).

Another issue brought to light from these articles is the validity of the research done by each group, for example, in *Beginning to Read* (1990). Ken Goodman in the article "Who's Afraid of Whole Language?" says that Adam's findings were determined before the research was done. The research was done under a federal commission to find research to support phonics first approaches (Goodman 1998). He also says that *Beginning to Read* made no real impact on teachers.

In an article in *The Reading Teacher*, real teachers discuss the reading wars. These teachers do not want to take sides in the reading wars. The teachers do not think the wars pertain to how real children learn to read and they believe their expertise holds more value than the methodology they use (Vellum and Brabham 2003). The people advocating these positions do not hold education positions but are politicians and religious leaders who have no real experience in classroom. In the classrooms I visited, I could see the effects of the reading wars. School systems encourage teachers to teach more phonics strategies than whole language strategies. One teacher told me that her school system considers whole language a taboo word. I considered this teacher's classroom to resemble a whole language classroom. During my observations, I did not find a classroom that I really thought could be considered a pure whole language classroom. I did observe classes I thought had the characteristics of pure phonics classroom. The largest school system visited enforces stricter limits on how teachers should teach reading. They strongly discourage deviating from basal readers.

Real classrooms do not always follow the trends in educational research. The research I found leans more towards blending whole language and phonics strategies while only two of the classrooms observed uses a blending of the two strategies. It also wanted to prove the effectiveness of whole language strategies. Real teachers feel more pressure to teach more phonics-based instruction. There is more pressure on the teacher to have high-test scores, and it is thought that whole language does not produce

results. In the educational methods class I am taking, the instructor, a fourth grade teacher, told us that if we structure our classrooms using whole language strategies our students will not test well. This puts pressure on the teachers to not deviate from the prescribed method in the basal readers. In the pure phonics classrooms, the teacher did not put much of their own ideas into their reading instruction for possibly this reason.

Learning to write helps students become better readers. When students write their own stories and become authors, it helps them to understand the authors whose work they read. In the phonics emphasis classrooms, students do not write. They do not get this experience on a regular basis. Writing is important to reading. It helps students to understand how text works. It can also help create an environment where students feel safe to experiment with their learning. In the two mixed classrooms, the teachers foster an environment where students can express themselves and not feel ashamed. They have multiple opportunities to write and share this writing. This helps to teach students to be critical readers with out criticizing. Writing helps students to understand style and other literary elements without even knowing. They experience the elements in their own writing.

When students read round robin, it does not sound very fluent and comprehending the story can be difficult. Phonics emphasis classrooms do not have as much print in the room as the whole language ones do. These classrooms have alphabet posters and posters with rules and tricks associated with phonics. Only one out of the three of phonics classrooms observed has a bookshelf with books for the children to choose to read on their own. The teachers do not give students time for sustained silent reading in these classrooms. The class reads the story from the basal reader and usually a leveled reader that goes along with the story. The experience with a text is not as important to the phonics emphasis classroom. Another difference between the two classes is the teacher does not place as much emphasis on writing in these classes. In

none of the classes observed did the students do any writing during their morning language block.

The exercises the students complete in these classrooms do not involve the students using the skills they have learned but require the students to fill in the blank. They spit the information out rather than show what they know. In the whole language classes, the students demonstrate their knowledge of words and reading through reading and activities that require the students to synthesize information.

Students have more control over their learning in whole language classrooms. They receive encouragement to construct their own learning in centers and by choosing their own reading material. They have many opportunities to express themselves in writing. They write in journals even when they cannot write very well and eventually write and publish their own books.

But the most effective classrooms I observed use a blend of phonics and whole language strategies. These students appear to be succeeding in reading and writing. In the phonics emphasis classroom, there did not seem to be as much value placed on enjoying reading. One teacher observed made a comment about how they only had two more stories left to read. The comment was not made in an excited tone that suggested that the next book might be great book, but in a way that suggested "look at what we have gotten through." In these classrooms, few of the students seemed to experience print that they enjoy. The students had very little choice in what they read and the teachers never give the students the opportunity to read silently during the day. This helps students to develop a love for reading and to become life long readers.

Personal Response:

This research helped me to believe even more strongly that students should experience the joys of reading a good book. They should be able to curl up with a good book for a little while in the classroom because some of these students do not have

access to print, generally, and good books, specifically, at home. Classrooms should offer the students experiences that help them to grow as students and good readers.

I do not see an absolute solution to the debate between phonic and whole language after doing this research. Students learn differently and will succeed in classrooms that take that into account. Phonics does not work for all students and neither does whole language. Whole language gives students more freedom in their learning, which can be good for encouraging a love reading in children. When this is done, students read at higher success rates and experience more success in school. A mix seems to be the best solution because it emphasizes the experience with the text but provides the phonics component that some children need.

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