

Enough already with the reading wars

BY RAFAEL HELLER

Back in the early 1990s, I worked for a year as a research assistant to a team of scholars — led by the researcher Catherine Snow — who were amid a long-term study of literacy development among children from low-income backgrounds, following their progress from preschool through high school. At the time, the children were in 1st grade, and my job was to visit them both at home and in school to assess their emergent reading skills, observe classroom instruction, interview their parents and teachers, and more.

The study was meant to shed light on why so many poor and working-class students succeed in “cracking the code” by the 2nd or 3rd grade, only to struggle with the more demanding texts they encounter in the upper grades. To learn what might explain their difficulties with higher-level texts, Snow and her colleagues cast a wide net, gathering data on topics such as the children’s home and school environments, their access to learning resources, their physical and mental health, and their varied experiences with oral and written language.

I’m no expert in reading instruction, but I learned enough that year to know that children’s literacy development depends upon a complex web of factors, going well beyond their ability to sound out letters and decode words. So I was genuinely perplexed by the reading war that erupted around that time. Why, I wondered, was the media devoting so much attention to a debate about phonics instruction, while saying nothing about the many other things that matter to students’ long-term success? (Years later, I learned that Snow, too, was put off by the reading war, which she viewed as needless infighting among more-or-less like-minded researchers. As she put it, “the public squabble in the field of reading is a classic case of the narcissism of small differences”; Snow, 2017, p. 8).

But as perplexed as I was 30 years ago, I’m downright baffled by what I see today, as prominent journalists and policy makers lob rhetorical grenades toward those who, they claim, refuse to accept what “the science of reading” tells us about effective instruction. In the 1990s, it was clear who the combatants were: Some experts prioritized the teaching of phonics, while others advocated a broader “whole language” approach. Today, though, just about every reading researcher on the planet — including those who support balanced literacy — agrees that all children should receive systematic phonics instruction, as do the vast majority of practitioners. So, what, exactly, is this new round of hostilities about?

To be sure, partisans can point to schools where teachers haven’t been trained to teach phonics, or where they give it little or no attention. And if that’s truly a widespread problem (which nobody really knows, at this point), then let’s redouble our efforts to help those teachers teach phonics effectively. However, let’s dispense with the specious claim that the science of reading calls for a narrow focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, and reading fluency (with an occasional nod to vocabulary and reading comprehension strategies). In fact, today’s science of reading (much like the science that informed Snow’s study in the early ’90s) offers a far more expansive view of literacy development, calling upon our schools to give serious attention to many other priorities, as well: language development, student writing, culturally responsive teaching, the careful selection of classroom texts, the needs of bilingual and second-language learners, and on and on. ■

Reference

Snow, C.E. (2017). Doubling down on serendipity. *Education Review*, 24.

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