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Reading wars are such a needless bore

In classrooms all across the US a war is going on. The war is an ideological one about the future of our nation's children. The soldiers? Spelling tests and picture books. The reading wars as it has been dubbed is an event that has been occurring for the past few decades in the American education system. The two sides being phonetics and whole language. Phonetics is an approach based around the idea of breaking down words into sounds and using those to read, connecting reading to speech. Whole language is an approach based around using context, such as pictures or where the word is in the sentence to determine the meaning of the word, connecting words to their use. However, the issue is not so black and white; English is too complicated of a language, and children too complicated as students for one side of the reading war to be objectively better. Both systems should be used to supplement each other.

Phonetics is the most popular method for teaching English in the US, and was the de facto approach until recently with the rise of whole language. The phonetics-based approach is built upon the idea of letter-sounds. Each word can be broken down into core sounds, and learning to identify these sounds in text and translate that into speech is the thesis of phonetics. This is especially important in recognizing new words. A freelance journalist did a piece on

phonetics education and wrote about her experience talking to students about it. In the article she wrote, "When Hazel returned to her desk, I asked her what goes through her mind when she gets to a word she doesn't know. 'Sound it out,' she said ... It feels weird when you don't know a word, she said, because it seems like everyone else knows it. But learning to read is kind of fun, she added. 'You can figure out a word you didn't know before'" (Sohn). Instead of being presented with what is essentially a new shape, students turn this new shape into something that they are comfortable with. Another proponent of phonetics noted a similar advantage, "The phonetic strategy gives beginning readers a tool to use when facing difficult and unfamiliar words, therefore building their confidence." (Pancare). Another benefit to phonetics is the words added to the reading vocabulary of a student are easily transformed into the speaking vocabulary, and vice versa. Students can easily take words they have read and use them in conversation, which is an essential task in growing the lexicons of these young students. Phonetics can help correlate speech and text in ways that can aid young students in developing their English skills.

All of this is good, but the issue lies in the fact that such an emphasis is put on what the word is, the sound, how it is spelled, that there is not enough emphasis put on what the words mean. In phonetics a word is a collection of sounds, regardless of typed or spoken it is still a collection of sounds. In phonetics there is some degree of separation between what a word is and what it means. This strips words of their meaning, they are words first and concepts second. The reason language was developed was because people need a way to transmit information, and phonetics separating the language from the information, and being the only method of teaching children this, is rather odd. This separation should not occur, when you read something your first association should be with something other than what sounds the word breaks into (Peterson).

Add to this the fact that phonetics do not always work. English is a mismatch of so many different languages that having a consistent list of what letters make what sounds is completely unreasonable, especially for a child to grasp. As a result, many words are simply forced to be memorized or have the list of rules children are taught about English constantly change and be added to, to an unreasonable degree. Taking these two issues into account it is surprising that phonetics is perceived as anything more than functional. Phonetics is still a good model to work with, however it has its limits and without building around them, it is simply a way to translate shapes into sounds.

Given the faults in the phonetics approach to teaching children, it is natural that an alternative would be constructed. While there have been many attempts at making such an alternative, the most popular is commonly referred to as the whole language approach. The whole language approach's core tenant is that words do not exist in a vacuum, and therefore understanding what you are reading should not only be reliant on the words. One educator with years of experience teaching whole language described the process by saying, "does it matter if I read Sydenham as "SID-EN-HAM" or 'SID-N-AM'? Perhaps not. Does it matter that I can decode the word "wind" but don't pronounce the two differently in 'the wind was too strong to wind the sail'? Yes, it probably does."(Zammit). Whole language allows for children to focus on the actual meanings of the words they are reading, which is the purpose of language in the first place, to convey ideas. If students are not taught that first and foremost, the purpose of language is gone, as a paper by the Cambridge University Press states, "The Whole Language movement was strongly opposed to approaches to teaching reading and writing that focused on isolated and discrete features of language and argued that language should be taught as a 'whole'" (Richards

& Rodgers). By focusing away from the actual words and more so on the ideas presented in English, whole language can equip kids to become more proficient readers.

However, this hyperfocus on getting the idea of the text is also the biggest flaw in the whole language system. Whole language's entire thesis is understanding the gist of things, however for many children's books this is achievable without reading a single word. An over reliance on the whole language system allows, even encourages, students to simply say what they think is going on in the book, as opposed to reading the book. Recounting the experience a parent had learning how her child was taught she said, "The teacher said, "If you don't know the word, just look at this picture up here," Woodworth recalled. 'There was a fox and a bear in the picture. And the word was bear, and she said, 'Look at the first letter. It's a 'b.' Is it fox or bear?'"(Hanford). Students are doing what resembles a game of Pictionary more than anything that resembles reading. The natural question to occur is, what happens when you remove the pictures? The answer is a total collapse. Students now rely on sight words, words that they know by looking not at the letters of the word, but essentially a photo of the word. They are not reading, they are memorizing. The California Policy Center did a report on this phenomenon, where they wrote, "He omits words. He adds words. He'll substitute a word...and just cruise right on,' [A concerned mother of a struggling reader] explained. Instead of looking at the letters to read the words, he is stuck in a guessing game because he doesn't have the skills to decode what the actual words are."(Swanson). The issue becomes even more exacerbated when the difference between words isn't as clear as "fox" or "bear". What happens when students cannot tell the difference between "communism" and "consumerism"? A total shift in meaning.

We have just established both sides of the reading wars, both their success and failures. Hopefully you can see where I am going with this. The failure of phonetics is that it treats words as shapes which are to be broken down and repeated, but the meanings of which are not important enough to warrant a deep focus. Whole language is the opposite, focusing on what the words are to an extreme degree to the point where it neglects to teach students how to understand words which are not already known: the antithesis of a teaching method. However, by using both methods, integrating the phonetics approach of how to read and the whole language approach in understanding what was read, each method can truly flourish. The solution to the problem that is teaching the next generation is not a black vs white free for all, it is a careful mixing of the two tones until a peaceful grey is achieved.

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