

The Literacy Decline and Instructional Practices

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Despite the increased number of innovations in education, there has been a steady decline in academic achievement for our elementary students in the area of literacy (Cooperman, 1978). In 1983 the Department of Education published a report entitled; "A Nation At-Risk" in which it stated that American education had deteriorated badly and that Americans fared very poorly compared to past performance and other countries. Fifteen years later in 1998, another report was published entitled "a nation still At Risk", in which they reported that education in America was not improving, but still declining, despite the many efforts to reform the system (Edmonson III, 2006). Cooperman suggests that the decline can be attributed to a philosophical shift that occurred in the 1960's in elementary education. According to Cooperman, this shift which moved away from teaching basic skills and subject matter with a focus on philosophical goals and a restructured set of intellectual goals in conjunction with whole language approach to reading instruction is the cause of the decline (Cooperman, 1978). I concur with Cooperman's theory and believe that this philosophical shift has led to the decline in our education system and in literacy in particular. Research indicates that children learn to read through systematic explicit instruction in phonics, and the ability to decode, along with the development of concrete reading strategies that with repeated use, transform into skills that will allow student to develop fluency and comprehension. In 1967 a review of reading methods was released and the findings were that the phonics approach produced better results in terms of the mechanical aspects of literacy and also in comprehension and fluency which is the ultimate goal in teaching reading (Sweet, 1996). Another report in 1985 published by the US Department of Education confirmed that, "Classroom research shows that, on the average, children who are taught phonics get off to a better start in learning to read than children who are not taught phonics. The picture that emerges from the research is that phonics facilitates word identification and that fast, accurate word identification is a necessary but not sufficient condition for comprehension. Thus, the issue is no longer, as it was several decades ago, whether children should be taught phonics." (Sweet, 1996). In 1991, a study released by Marilyn Jager Adams reported, that "All children can benefit from, and many children require systematic, direct instruction in the elements of the alphabetic code" (Sweet, 1996).

With the research supporting systematic explicit instruction and the focus on basic skills and subject matter are we still educating our children through faulty measures. Why are teachers still engaging in poor instructional strategy? Why is compensatory education whole language instruction still popular in education? I would argue that there are several reasons. I firmly believe that one is financially driven. With the pressure and challenges that have arisen because of the NCLB and the increased accountability, many school district administrators will choose to purchase a program from a publishing company with the hope to turn their failing school into a passing school. Each year publishing companies compete for schools to adopt their reading programs. However, I believe that the money being spent on these programs may not be necessary. In fact, research done in 1986 by the National Advisory Council, gave many examples of how we could reduce the cost of providing reading instruction and still improve reading scores. In Massachusetts, primary teachers were trained in intensive systematic phonics instruction. With this new training the cost of the reading program decreased by 88% compared to the whole language program previously used (Sweet, 1996). In Mesa Arizona, a principal reported that within three years after teachers were trained in phonics instruction, expenditures per student for reading materials dropped from \$23.42 to \$8.50. This same school also surpassed the national, state and district norms in language and math as well (Sweet, 1996). Clearly, the sale of instructional reading materials is big business and I believe that has and will continue to play a role in the continued delivery of faulty reading instruction.

In addition to the financial influence, there are other factors that contribute to the continued use of faulty reading measures. Dr. Patrick Goff outlines those factors, "Preventing Reading Failure: An Examination of the Myths of Reading Instruction". He points out that although we cannot blame poor literacy rates solely on the lack of phonics, to say that it has not a major contributing factor would be foolish (Goff, 1987).

Possibly the biggest contributing factor to the decline in reading achievement is our move away from systematic phonics and toward whole language. During the progressivist movement in the early 1950's phonics instruction has been looked upon as a negative way of teaching reading. If you practice phonics instruction as opposed to whole word reading, or look and say as it was named, you were seen as a taskmaster making a punishing ordeal for students (Goff, 1987). Despite opposition in 1955 by researchers such as Rudolf Flesch, the look say approach was being adapted and implemented not only as instructional tool in elementary classrooms, but as an accepted method among teacher educators at higher education institutions. I believe that forced tradition, or the reading experts and teacher's reluctance to accept change, and poor teacher training are also contributing factors. Many teachers are content to use the practices that their professor taught them, or they simply follow the basal textbook, provided by the district in which they teach. In an article in Education Week, Rudolf Flesch states, "Decades of painstaking research have shown that neither our schools nor our teachers are to blame for the illiteracy problem in America. Rather, the fault lies with a method of teaching reading that was first proposed for general use in 1927 and has since been adopted in most of our schools. It is called the 'whole-word' [look and say] method because it relies on memorizing the shapes and meanings of whole words. It was introduced with the best intentions: the idea was to make learning to read more fun for our children. Today, it is almost universally used in this country" (Flesch, 1981).

One report filed by the Oklahoma council of public affairs published in 1997 by Clowes goes as far as claiming that whole language is not only a faulty reading instructional measure, but is to blame for a wide range of learning disorders. Dr. Campbell attributes whole language with confusing our children so much so that they are labeled as having ADHD and behavioral problems (Clowes, 1997). He states that over a period of two years, many children were referred to him for hyperactivity and behavioral disorders and he believes that the true cause is a failure of the schools to teach reading rationally and effectively. He also states that the biggest issue is the schools lack of acceptance that the reading program being used is faulty and needs to be changed (Clowes, 1997). "Dr. Campbell calls the instructional concepts of whole language learning "fraudulent" and finds it "astonishing that the school system would adopt and continue to use such an unproven and defective system of instruction." (Clowes, 1997). Dr. Campbell insists that a return to systematic phonics instruction is necessary for student success. Some researchers believe that the answer is to return to the practices that created success prior to the progressivist movement when whole language was introduced and accepted as effective reading instruction.

It is clear that ideology is trumping scientific evidence in terms of teaching reading. In 2000, 2006 and 2008, reports from the national reading panel indicate that without systematic explicit instruction in phonics our academic achievement in literacy has been declining steadily since the 1970's and will continue to decline if the paradigm does not shift back to a logical approach to teaching reading. I believe that the lack of phonics instruction is the major factor in our declining literacy rates. In evaluating the theoretical views, I believe that we should find a balance between behaviorist view, which favors teacher directed learning, and the constructivist view which favors student centered approach. I see a problem with advocating only one theoretic viewpoint when it comes to teaching. I believe that both are valid when used where most effective in the educational process. The following chart compares the theoretical views (Rehyner, 2008).

Behaviorism (Official Theory¹)	Constructivism (Classic Theory)
Teacher-Centered Direct Instruction	Student-Centered Instruction
Transmission (Paulo Freire's Banking Model)	Experiential Interactive
Phonics Emphasis	Whole Language Emphasis
Sound & Skills Emphasis	Meaning Emphasis

As I examine these two theoretical views, it is evident that both theoretical viewpoints are valid in some areas of instruction. For example, in reading instruction during phonics in particular, teacher-centered direct instruction is effective. However, during instruction in comprehension, a meaning emphasis is needed. It is rational to suggest that if we adjust our theoretical viewpoint based on specific learning goals, we can combine the two theoretical viewpoints, and increase effective instruction. It is also logical to conclude that if we can incorporate both theories when appropriate, engage in effective teacher training for reading instruction, and stop relying on expensive programs provided by big companies, we can change the course of literacy achievement to a positive one.

As I examined the research and publication on this topic, it was overwhelmingly clear that more updated and meaningful research is necessary to determine if in fact we have identified the areas of weakness in our educational system pertaining to literacy instruction.

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