The Seven Year Itch:
Politics and Literacy

by

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For me, teaching is a rewarding, creative challenge. However, it is also a difficult profession. Outside forces, overly invested in philosophical, pedagogical, and political battles, pose some of these difficulties. These forces cause upheaval in the professional community and unsettling changes in the classroom.

The most unsettling of institutional upheavals is the textbook/curriculum adoption cycle. By the time students graduate from high school, legislators have often put them through three different curricula in each subject.

These textbook adoption cycles are supposed to promote improvement in instruction and materials and reflect the best of recent research findings. Professionals, particularly in literacy education, need to keep pace with cutting edge research. Their research sheds more light on literacy learning, which in turn must be incorporated into theory and practice. Yet the curriculum adoption process more often reflects the prevailing political climate and victories in intensely-lobbied publisher wars than breakthroughs in learning theory and practice.

To some extent, the corporate propensity for built-in obsolescence, the need to create never-ending consumption, is at play. As a late-model literacy solution comes into vogue, the last rage fades. But classrooms aren’t fashions. We need to create consistent, effective opportunities for academic growth. This year we in California are experiencing yet another literacy adoption rife with political and economic considerations that have little to do with effective teaching.

Patricia Cunningham, in Classrooms That Work, says, “The question of how best to teach children to read and write is one which has been argued, debated, and
researched for decades. It is a question to which there is not a definite answer” (p. 13). The lack of clear answers invites important conversations about literacy education. The debate, however, concentrates in two extreme camps, each claiming to have the definitive solution.

Over the past decade, my students and I have become casualties in the war between the pedagogical camps of whole-focused and parts-focused literacy education. We have suffered as the literacy pendulum swings from “literature-based” to “basic skills,” from “whole language” to “phonics first.” As we endure the current swing to basic skills and phonics, we are again being asked to break our instructional mirrors and endure seven years of bad luck. We are asked to embrace another new reading program while being shamed and blamed for following what, seven years ago, was state of the art.

In my twenty-four years of teaching, I have experienced four of these schizophrenic swings in literacy adoption. When I started teaching in 1973, teachers were using skills-based reading programs like Distor, with workbooks and spellers as the mainstay of reading instruction. At that time, first graders did very little writing. They mostly copied words or key sentences from the board. Group stories were written, with children dictating and the teacher writing on a chart from which the children would then copy the story for themselves. Second graders began to write on their own, but this was usually limited to sentences using their spelling words. Not until third grade did they attempt to write their own stories, and even then, writing was not viewed as a process; the focus was always on the product.

Two years later, when I was barely getting the hang of Distor, literature-based programs such as Bill Martins’ The Sounds of Language became the base for literacy teaching. Spellers and workbooks were still supplied, and I knew enough to keep skills in my lessons, although I did welcome the wonderful literature. During this time, the revolutionary idea of writing as a process was promoted by the Bay Area Writing Project in Berkeley. At my school we began to try to understand and teach writing this way, but we lacked good training. I remember not knowing how to teach the skills within the process. We tried to encourage fluency and children were writing more, but writing conventions were not very evident. I wondered if we were doomed to have one or the other, but not both.

In 1982 the back-to-basics hysteria hit, and we were told to throw out the literature, replacing it with SRA kits and basal text programs, again with workbooks and spellers. Like many other teachers, I refused to throw out my literature books, keeping them to integrate with the new materials. We were tired of the swings in teaching fashions where the political yaysayers of yesterday became the naysayers of today. Also, the students and I enjoyed the literature books that were deemed outmoded.

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In 1987 I attended my first Central Coast Writing Project Summer Institute at UC Santa Cruz, and I better understood the writing process as I myself became a writer. I understood firsthand that both process and product are important, that it is the development of ideas and fluency, the process of response, revision, editing, and publishing which all contribute to a polished product. This new understanding allowed me to construct my own pedagogy, becoming a more effective teacher of writing. I wanted, but did not yet have, this same understanding and effectiveness as a teacher of reading.

The seven-year cycle hit again in 1989 with the swing back to literature-based reading instruction and “Whole Language.” At last, it seemed to be a time when process in both reading and writing was going to be the focus, with a conscientious treatment of skills within the context of literacy events. Whole language is a literature-based, meaning-centered approach to literacy instruction. Although it centers on working with the whole text for meaning, enjoyment, response, interpretation and extension, it also includes working with appropriate parts of the text, as children’s needs dictate, in order to move them towards independence and fluency in reading and writing. Unfortunately, the extremists of the whole language movement insisted that we adopt only literature books, seemingly
certain that skills would be learned indirectly from exposure to the literature.

Rather than a true whole language methodology, the pendulum swing drove us to adopt a narrower, more limited version. A wholesale dumping of basal books, workbooks, spellers and skills-related materials ensued. We received no training to integrate the teaching of skills within the teaching of literature. Again, we seemed doomed to have one or the other, but not both.

What are we leaving behind each time we abruptly change the materials, the curricula, and the pedagogy of literacy education? When we ostensibly throw out all methods and materials every seven years, we are in essence trying to wipe the slate clean. Are we to leave nothing of our prior knowledge to build on? Once an adoption occurs, teachers are herded like cattle into training rooms to be told how to use the new materials, a practice which in itself creates the beginning of failure. If the new curriculum represents paradigm shifts in literacy education, then teachers need a thorough understanding of the theory behind labels like “whole language.” In her article, “When Teachers Use Literature for Literacy Instruction,” Glennellen Pace states, “When a teacher undertakes activities in the absence of a coherent theory of language and learning, inconsistencies and contradictions in children’s literacy experiences often appear” (p. 13). These inconsistencies and contradictions, these holes in a teacher’s understanding, create confusion for both teachers and students.

Don Holdaway saw this too, and warned us more than eighteen years ago in his book, The Foundations of Literacy, that “Each major method has been successful for about the same proportion of children, while at the same time producing its own crop of failures. In almost every conflict of reading method it would be true to say that both sides had been right in insisting that their insights were crucial, but both sides had been abysmally wrong in insisting that the insights of the other side were totally wrong” (p. 25). Furthermore, Patricia Cunningham tells us, “The question to be asked is not ‘which approach?’ but rather, ‘How can we have classrooms so that we have it all?’ The reason the great debate rages on is that there is truth in all the arguments” (Cunningham, p. 15).

Why don’t we learn? Why do we allow the extremists to take us from one side to the other? Why can’t we accept that all learning requires a knowledge and utility of parts within meaningful wholes? The cognitive research of Marie Clay, Constance Weaver, Frank Smith and others shows that, to create meaning, our brains both take in parts and integrate those into wholes, and take in wholes and break those into parts. The literacy student who can draw on both of these processes is the most successful. Therefore, the teacher who can incorporate both, as the students’ needs dictate, within a meaning-centered approach will assure that students have all the tools necessary for independent, fluent literacy.

But there is a price to pay for the teachers who try to avoid the extremes. At each swing of the pendulum, there are staff divisions, teacher self-doubts, and an ensuing silence. As I have stayed on the sidelines of the extremist debate, trying to garner enough philosophy and methodology to support my instruction, my sense of isolation has intensified. I have been a refugee from the pedagogy wars.

Nevertheless, in the past few years, many teachers have attempted to take back our classrooms by encouraging a balanced, consistent and sustainable approach to literacy teaching. I think that we, as professionals, need to dig in our heels and no longer allow
outside forces, driven by pride, politics, or publishers, to jerk us around every seven years.

However, so that we do not become calcified, teachers need to follow Don Holdaway's advice by becoming "... those who are determined to try out ideas for themselves, to think deeply and to be convinced slowly; those who are prepared to read more widely when in doubt; and those who wish to influence outcomes from an informed conviction which they have tested in their own experience" (Holdaway, p. 11). It is important to keep pace with research and to modify our teaching, honing our practice based on both our professional experience and on new "cutting edge" ideas and programs. But rather than allowing the teaching profession to be coerced into arbitrary changes every seven years, we need to cultivate professional dialogue and reflection. We need to keep the best methods and still question them, so that we can grow.

Although I have tried to stay away from the battles of whole vs. parts, I have not abandoned the attempt to find out what it is that students need in order to become independent readers and writers. I have continued to read the literature on emergent literacy, to engage in professional conversation, and, since 1989, to conduct teacher research.

Teachers constantly do research in their classrooms. Most is done on an informal basis, as we plan, design, and implement materials and activities, monitor our teaching and assess and document our students' progress, and then reevaluate our units of study for possible future use. This process inevitably leaves us with questions, and we form hypotheses about the learning and the materials which affect our choices for the next lesson. We then move naturally from this informal research method into a conscious process of documentation to better inform our teaching.

The research, the writing down of what we see and think and wonder in the classroom, stimulates deep thinking, reflection, and clarification. It is the children, always the children, who can guide us as they show us what works and does not work for them. Their successes must always be our compass, for "Learning to read and write ought to be one of the most joyful and successful of human undertakings" (Ibid., p. 1). Therefore, this joy and success must be what motivates us to keep or change literacy methods and materials.

In the past two years, the wonderful literacy successes in my classroom have given me the professional self-confidence which I yearned for but which eluded me for two decades. My literacy program has gone from a literature-based, "combination" approach, built from scattered pieces of what has worked over the years, to a much more well thought-out "comprehensive literature- and strategies-based program." We use literature and "leveled books" to model, share, and guide the reading and writing process while learning specific cueing systems and strategies which support independence and fluency. Students learn to self-monitor their literacy process and progress, building metacognitive abilities that give them ownership of their learning.

Last year, for the first time in twenty-four years, all of my first-graders went on to second grade as independent readers and writers. I owe this success not to a newer, better, faster literacy model, but rather to my teacher-research which has led me, through the children, to the professional literacy resources which have been out there all along. It is my questions, my observations, my students—my research—which has allowed me to discern which in-services and other professional opportunities to pursue, what to change, what to keep, and where to go next. My research and the children have taught me that the best learner/teacher is the one who can self-monitor and be open to the next step in that learning/teaching process. It is this self-monitoring that has become the focus of my inquiry, and it is this inquiry, rather than the seven-year itch of textbook adoption, which guides my teaching.

References

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