

Unedited version of article

Sarah is looking forward to beginning school next year. Her kinder year was fun but two hours was not enough time to do all the things she wanted to do, and learn all the things that schools can teach. Of course, she has already learned so much - she speaks clearly in well constructed sentences, she gets along well with her age peers, having figured out, or been taught, the rules on games, sharing, listening, when to behave and when to "let go". Sarah is especially keen to learn to read and has been primed by her parents. Since before she could remember, her parents have read to her for about thirty minutes each evening, she never misses Sesame Street or Playschool, and regularly tapes them on kinder days. She spends about an hour a day watching them. Sarah loves rhymes and word games (especially when on car trips): She makes up letter strings with magnetic letters on the fridge; she copies letters on butchers' paper using crayons; and she teaches her dolly how to hold a book and run her finger under the words. Sarah is also learning how to use the keyboard on the family's computer so she can play games on it. Sarah will have spent perhaps 4000 hours on those experiences important for the development of reading skills before she even steps over the formal education threshold.

Johnny is the same age as Sarah. He is healthy, active (Are you kidding? says his mother) and can only be found indoors when he's asleep, in trouble, or when Clint Eastwood/Arnie/Bruce Lee are on the box. He loves action - riding his BMX over home-made berms, shooting baskets, or creating his own version of Warne's leggings. His parents used to read him stories, but he was always asleep within 2 minutes, or complained about them reading "baby stuff" - so it faded out, and besides, said Dad, he's just a happy healthy little boy, he'll have plenty of time to learn stuff like reading at school. Johnny only watched Sesame Street or Playschool on really wet days when he wasn't allowed to timeshift the NBL basketball. Johnny shows no interest in "girls games" like those Sarah enjoys, although he does have a good memory for statistics - who shot the most baskets on the NBA final, how many possessions Michael Long had in the AFL Grand Final.

Averaged out over his pre school life, Johnny spent about 6 minutes per day, or less than 200 hours total, on experiences important to the development of his reading skills. Johnny is looking forward to starting school - he will have lots more friends to play with - maybe even enough for a cricket team.

Sarah is advanced, attuned to the school system, and largely self-motivated. Johnny is naive about formal learning, attuned to active play, and not self-directed.

David is a quiet serious boy. He has never had many friends and, being a bit uncoordinated, doesn't play a lot of outdoor games. He seems more comfortable with adults, and can have a conversation of surprising sophistication. He enjoys Sesame Street and Playschool, but particularly likes the news and current affairs programs.

David's language development seems advanced and he speaks clearly except when he gets excited - then words just tumble out. He is a bit forgetful - when his mother asks him to get his brown sox and grey jumper, he often forgets one or the other, or brings the wrong colours. Although he tries to play word games, his little sister is much better at finding words that rhyme, or in finding "something starting with B." She also beats him in the game "How many things in your bedroom can you name in 30 seconds?"

He arranges letters on the fridge in an odd jumble - has done for several years. David's parents have always enjoyed reading to him. They have taken pride in the ease with which his vocabulary has widened to include many of the words they have introduced. They tried to get him to follow the words in the book while they read, but he soon lost interest in doing that. His parents are sure he will manage reading when he's ready because he is, after all, clearly a bright boy.

David's home has provided many hours of experience important for literacy development, and David is looking forward to having the opportunity to learn so much more about the world.

Given that children enter school with marked differences in maturity, experience, attitude and inheritance, how well does our system cope in achieving the goal of literacy for all? Recent newspaper headlines suggest that there may be at least a perceived problem. Literacy for all is a noble goal, but if it is a little unrealistic in the present economic climate, then at least we should be doing the best possible job with the dollars we've got. We should be training our teachers both in pre-service and in-service courses to use methods which are known to be effective across the range of students who come under our care. There is increasing concern among parents, employers and tertiary teachers that we are not doing a good enough job. Researchers tell us the whole language methods we are using have little theoretical or research support to justify their use. Further we may be doing worse than simply teaching ineffectively - we may be teaching the wrong strategies, thereby creating, rather than resolving, literacy problems.

Some educational theorists believe that all children have a natural desire and ability for learning, and that the role of teachers is to stand back and offer encouragement and stimulation - in other words, to offer a supportive learning environment in which children will choose activities which will enhance their learning. In this view, teachers who direct the learning - set goals, systematically instruct, offer sustained regular correction of errors, and provide ample practice - are considered to be out-of-date. The first approach seems to suit Sarah just fine. She is co-operative, socially skilled and has both the curiosity to want to engage in learning, and the confidence to risk making mistakes. Both her teacher and her parents are delighted with her progress. Johnny enjoys the freedom to choose too, although his choices are always sports-related, and he is easily bored, becoming boisterous in class, and is sometimes asked to leave the room for a visit with the vice-principal. His teacher commented at a recent parent-teacher interview that Johnny will need to take responsibility for his own learning, but she is confident that he will do so, given time. David doesn't say much in his co-operative learning group, and his teacher has to regularly remind herself to see how he is getting along. He sometimes wants to remain in class at recess, and in her conversations with him, he impresses as a studious, intelligent boy who seems to relate better to adults than to his peers. His teacher is a little concerned, because, although he tries, his progress in the early stages of reading doesn't match his excellent vocabulary and oral expression. The class uses authentic literature, rather than graded readers or vocabulary control, and while many of the children are remembering some words they've seen before, David is very inconsistent, and his invented spelling remains very immature. Still he is appreciative of the praise and encouragement given to him by his teacher.

The school has a strong commitment to the whole language approach to literacy. Most of the teachers have been trained in the philosophy, either at the teacher training stage, and/or through in-service programs provided and endorsed by the Department of School Education. This approach assumes that learning to read and write is just as natural as learning to speak. Just as speech develops readily in a supportive, language-rich environment (the home), so should the school try to recreate that environment for reading to similarly develop. We are not formally instructed how to speak - we learn to speak by speaking and being spoken to - so, the argument goes, we can learn to read without formal instruction - by reading and being read to. This is a very important assumption, for it guides what should, and what should not, take place in the classroom. If reading is much the same as speaking, then any activity involving oral language should help reading acquisition. Since the processes are similar, learning to read will occur just by language activities, and meaningful engagement with quality literature. In this approach, one doesn't, and shouldn't, go through all that bothersome phonics instruction which tries to break down reading into little bits and pieces, skills and subskills. Reading is wholistic thus teaching should also be wholistic.

What if the equivalence assumption is wrong! Researchers are now saying that the two processes are not the same. Speaking is indeed a natural system (all communities have speech), reflecting a biological specialization for language. All speech systems are similar in that they are developed by combining about 40 sounds. However only a minority of communities have a written form. They are artificial devices varying dramatically in their structure across different societies. They are an invention, the principle of which has to be discovered by, or taught to, every new reader. This principle, known as the alphabetic principle, is deceptively simple. It involves being able to recognize and use the fact that sounds (phonemes) can be reliably represented by letters in words. This principle in turn requires

(i) some degree of phonemic awareness: knowing that words are composed of sounds, can be broken down into sounds; and, that by blending sounds, words can be constructed;

(ii) some knowledge of the letter shapes and how they represent sounds in our alphabet;

(iii) an ability to combine these two features. This is trickier than it at first appears. Speech comes before reading, and we do not think about sounds in words when we speak- it is an acquired skill. Speech is delivered in a more or less continuous stream, without pauses, yet words are separated in print through spacing. Some children have a great deal of difficulty in analysing speech in this way to help map it onto print.

Sarah, though, has little difficulty in comprehending this notion. She has been playing word games, rhyming, can sing or recite the alphabet, has recognized and used plastic letters, and knows print conventions. That her teacher has not made this principle clear to Sarah is of no consequence, she came to school with extensive literacy experience. Johnny has had far less experience and is still to discover the principle. Reading is a memory test, as every word has a different shape, so he tends to confuse words which are vaguely visually alike. He has no idea about words which he has not seen before, or even those he sees irregularly. It would be helpful if someone would teach him the principle, but that would involve teaching the subskills of reading, a practice completely at odds with the whole language philosophy. Johnny will probably get there eventually but he may never find pleasure in reading, because the task was made too difficult initially. On the other hand, he may continue to rely on memory and guesswork - strategies which collapse around Year 4 when the number of words he must recognise becomes overwhelming. David has little chance in this classroom. He has significant difficulty in recognizing the sounds in words. He will not thrive in such an unstructured, discovery-oriented environment. If he is to progress, he will need more intensive teaching over a longer period of time, with far more practice than Sarah, or even Johnny, requires. He is the least likely to overcome inadequacies in instruction.

He may be left to develop at his own rate, with the reassurance that he will catch up when he is ready. Sadly, this advice is misguided. By the time his parents become more assertive, David will be in upper-primary school and extra assistance, even if available, will be too little too late. He will be in a downward spiral, reading very little, error-prone and halting, with little comprehension, because it takes all his attention to decode words. While Sarah reads 2000 words a week in class and 20,000 words out of class, David reads 20 words a week in class and less than 2000 words out of class. Unfortunately after the early grades, the amount of reading affects not only vocabulary development - and thus comprehension - but it appears to influence the continued development of intellectual ability. David not only does not catch up, the gap between him and his peers widens over time.

What assistance might students be receiving in their whole language classroom. The teacher follows an approach which considers reading to be a type of guessing game, in which skilled readers glide over the print using as little visual information as possible. The idea is to extract meaning from print by a process of predicting upcoming words before they arise, and then using a few letters to confirm the identity of the word. There are two major problems with this model. If it were true that skilled readers did read this way, would it necessarily be the best way for beginning readers to attempt? Might they not need to progress through stages, using simpler strategies initially? In any event, the assertion about what skilled readers do is completely and demonstrably false. At the time it was proposed this assertion could not be tested, but eye movement studies have clearly shown that good readers do not only sample the text. Good readers use rapid, context-free, automatic decoding skills. They look at every letter of every word, and their decoding skills usually provide the meaning of what they see before prediction strategies can come into play. Whole language advocates believe that good readers use context strategies, and that poor readers would become good if they could be taught to do so. This involves guessing words, using clues based on what word would fit, and still preserve the sentence's meaning and grammatical structure. Unfortunately, this is also false - poor readers use context strategies at least as much as good readers, when the passage read is equally difficult for each group. Over-reliance on context strategies for word identification is thus an indicator of inadequate decoding skills, and not a cause for celebration.

In Sarah, Johnny, and David's classroom, they are encouraged to guess words from their understanding of the sentence, and from the first letter or two. Sarah doesn't take much notice, because she has discovered that her guesses are wrong too often - even skilled readers guess accurately only about one in four times. To make matters worse the very words she tries to guess are the ones which contribute the most information to the sentence, and thus are the hardest to guess. Fortunately, Sarah makes fewer and fewer decoding errors, so rarely has to guess - she knows how to work out what unknown words say. If she doesn't know the unknown word's meaning from the sentence context, she will ask, or use her dictionary - further increasing her vocabulary. Johnny is encouraged to guess, but he doesn't really appreciate the advice, and often puts in outlandish, or risqué, words to get a laugh from his peers. He is just drifting along. Predicting from context hasn't helped David either; he tries desperately to avoid reading out aloud, and even in silent reading, he derives neither understanding nor pleasure.

The most alarming aspect of this style of teaching is that it is endorsed by several State education authorities, teacher unions, and training bodies. There is something wrong with decision-making processes when such overwhelming educational evidence can be ignored because the approach sounds attractive, and fits the humanist ideal. The Sarahs and some of the Johnnies escape unscathed, but increasingly our failure to "make a difference" to perhaps 20% of our students is an indictment of the system. It is hard to imagine that parents will continue to be as sanguine as have policy makers thus far. Parents are being asked to produce more Sarahs through home based pre-reading and reading activities. This has potential benefit, except that the sorts of activities suggested only parallel the methods that schools are supposed to use. There are specific activities related to phonemic awareness with which most parents could profitably assist their children, but they tend not to be publicized. If parents took responsibility for the literacy development of their children, then schools could continue to offer whole language instruction without demur. On the other hand, if whole language advocates would become responsive to the outcomes of the practices derived from their theories, then the glaring shortcomings could be overcome. This may be a faint hope because whole language purists are ideologically, rather than outcome, driven.

The classroom described above is one in which the teacher has whole-heartedly adopted the philosophy of whole language which was promoted in her training. Few teachers, particularly in primary schools, would be unaffected by the blossoming of this model in our schools, but how many teachers have accepted the model to this degree? It is difficult to know - teachers may toe the party line in promotion interviews - but privately include phonic skill lessons, because their classroom experience has demonstrated the need, especially for at-risk children. If they do so, they risk derision from some colleagues and consultants, and perhaps, jeopardise opportunities for advancement. There are a number of positive aspects to whole language, but its theoretical rigidity makes rapprochement with more traditional approaches very difficult. Nevertheless, some researchers have noted the benefits to children of supplementing whole language teaching with phonemic awareness activities in Prep, and with teaching letter-sound knowledge, blending and segmenting as individual children are shown to require it. The research evidence is very clear about the critical importance of these skills. Teachers should not feel intimidated by those who would disparage such direct teaching of reading skills. It is the ideologues who claim to know all about the reading process who have been shown to be incorrect in a number of important areas. The Federal Government report "The Literacy Challenge" pointed out that virtually all current curriculum guidelines on primary school literacy teaching are based on the whole language approach. It is unlikely to be abandoned in the short term, so it must be rescued. The fate of many children's reading progress depends on the preparedness of Education Departments to confront the evidence, and the errors in curriculum guidelines. It should be addressed as a matter of urgency.