

Phonics and Whole Word/Whole Language Controversies, 1948-1998: An Introductory History

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From the mid teens of the twentieth century until his premature death in 1960, William S. Gray towered above his colleagues in the reading profession in reputation and influence. A key figure in the incorporation of the whole word methodology into reading textbooks, he was already, by 1955--the year that Rudolf Flesch published *Why Johnny Can't Read*--the author of 480 scholarly publications and senior author of Scott Foresman's best-selling *Basic Readers* (Gray, 1985). Seven years earlier, in 1948, Gray had published a book titled *On Their Own in Reading*. His own approach to reading instruction may be summarized by his three rhetorical questions, to which we may supply the answers. "Shall we, in response to public demand" (an interesting comment in itself on public perceptions about phonics as early as 1948) "reinstate the old mechanical phonic drills and content that inevitably result in dull, word-by-word reading?" [NO!] "Shall we go back to the 'guessing from context' that was emphasized in the thirties?" [NO!] "Or shall we develop word-perception skills that are functional in the total reading act?" [YES!] (Gray, 1948, p. 28).¹

Gray proceeded to present the five approaches to word attack that were enshrined in what Jeanne Chall would later call the "conventional wisdom" (Chall, 1967). Gray's "five major aides to the perception of words in reading" are: first: meaning clues from the context; second, the form or appearance of a word (usually called configuration clues); third, structural clues (roots, prefixes, suffixes); fourth, "phonetic" clues (phonic clues); and fifth, the dictionary (Gray, 1948, pp. 40-41). These were all to be used, of course, as adjuncts to the prevailing whole word, or "look-and-say" approach.

But in 1955, as you all know, Rudolf Flesch published his searing attack on the reading profession. It is always known by the first half of its title as *Why Johnny Can't Read*, but the rest of the title was just as inflammatory, because it removed reading instruction from the hands of the reading experts and restored it to parents: *And What You Can Do About It*. In his attack on the whole word approach, Flesch charged the reading experts with treating English as if it were Chinese, instead of the alphabetic system it is, and he claimed that the reading profession had ignored its own research and deliberately "concealed" the "true facts" from the public (Flesch, 1955, p.61). He vilified the list of word attack approaches described by David Russell (1949), which deviated from Gray's mainly by having configuration clues in first place and phonetic and structural ones in the last. He sneered at the "analytic phonics" that the reading profession was advocating.

The effect of Flesch's publication upon the public was remarkable. Parents, long frustrated over the current system, devoured *Why Johnny Can't Read*. The book was on the bestseller list for over thirty weeks. It sold 99,000 hardcover copies upon its first appearance and its total sales topped over half a million copies (Monaghan & Saul, 1987, p. 106). The reception of *Why Johnny Can't Read* by the reading community was another matter. The members of the reading profession circled

the wagons in defense of their respected colleagues, whose scholarship had been attacked and whose motives had been impugned.

In reaction to Flesch's book, the reading establishment remained profoundly antagonistic towards systematic phonics and any reading programs based solely on such an approach. Many of you may be too young to remember the effect on the classroom teacher of the prohibition against what was called, pejoratively, "isolating the sounds of the letters." In the American classroom of the late 1950s and early 1960s, teaching sounds in isolation, the "kuh-a-tuh, cat" approach, became absolutely taboo. The profession was quick to explain why: it was dull drill that distracted the child completely from the meaning of what she read; and there was also such huge variability in the sounds represented by a given letter that teaching letters as sounds was impracticable even if it had been advisable, which of course it wasn't. Vowels were particularly hopeless: "to teach the child to speak a particular sound for a particular vowel is at all times inadvisable," as a textbook titled *Fundamentals of Basic Reading Instruction* put it as late as 1973 (Bamman, Dawson & McGovern, 1973, p. 142).

The reading profession said, to a man and woman, that teachers should use an eclectic approach, because using one method to the exclusion of all other methods could do "real damage" to the child (Bamman, Dawson & McGovern, 1973, p. 142). Even those reading professionals who now discussed phonics openly, as Dolores Durkin, Arthur Heilman, and Anna Cordts did in 1962, 1964, and 1965, respectively, opposed systematic phonics. Cordts, for instance, was unalterably opposed to "sounding out." "It has long been known," she opined, "that sounding out a word is not only a boresome [sic] and laborious task but it is incompatible with comprehension in reading" (Cordts, 1965, p. 14). Instead, the call was for a "Balanced Reading Program," as Lillian Gray put it in her *Teaching Children to Read*--one that would be free from the "Rugged Phonics Excess" of the 1870-1917 period, the following "Look-and-Say Excess," and the subsequent "Silent-Reading Excess" (L. Gray, 1963, pp. 50-53).

In 1967, again as you all know, Jeanne Chall published her *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*. The key difference between Flesch and Chall was not just one of tone: Chall was an admired member of the professional reading community. In a careful and highly readable analysis, and in measured and temperate prose, she reported the results of her own research into the "Great Debate": that indeed the research, of poor quality as it undoubtedly was, suggested not only that a change to a code-emphasis approach would produce superior results, but that "systematic" phonics was more effective than the "analytic" phonics of the conventional wisdom. Publishers of basal reading programs, she said, could "play a major role" in effecting this change by fine-tuning their programs (Chall, 1967, p. 309).

What were the consequences of Chall's rehabilitation of systematic phonics? Her most lasting contribution was that it eventually became respectable, even among members of the reading profession, to suggest that M "said" "mmm" and even that B "said" "buh." Dolores Durkin, author of the best-known book on phonics, now conceded, in a book titled *Teaching Young Children to Read*, that there was "a need for some children to isolate sounds" (Durkin, 1972, p. 351). A few texts for teachers identified the contents of phonics instruction in some detail, even though they retained the earlier elements of the conventional wisdom, such as configuration clues (e.g., Bush & Huebner, 1970; Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald, 1967).

It would also be true to say that Chall's work gave a boost to those publishers who were already publishing what they called phonic or linguistic series, such as Merrill's *Linguistic Readers*, Lippincott's *Basic Reading* series--which excited much interest because Chall had used sample pages from the series as illustrations for The Great Debate--and the *Open Court* series. (Blouke Carus, the founder of the *Open Court* series, said that before Chall's book came out he had had to drag people in from the aisles at International Reading Association conventions to look at his booth; after it, teachers inquired spontaneously. *Open Court* ended up giving presentations to 150,000 teachers all over the country.)² In short, Chall's book changed teachers' attitudes toward phonics, particularly toward explicit/systematic phonics.

Chall's book did not, however, result in a profound change in the traditional basal reading series: basal readers designed along systematic phonic lines were, and continue to be, in a tiny minority.³ Most publishers of the traditional basals simply added supplementary phonics lessons to their traditional look-and-say plus "conventional wisdom" readers. Chall's own conclusion as to the effect of her book, voiced thirteen years later in a 1983 update, was that "basal readers teach more phonics and they teach it earlier than in 1967" (Chall, 1983, p. 37).

The great problem with phonics lessons as supplements was, and still remains, that the phonic elements are unrelated--or at best only marginally related--to anything the child is actually reading, whether in the readers or in anything else. Charles Walcutt, coauthor of the systematic phonics program *Lippincott's Basic Reading*, summarized the problems with supplemental phonics programs this way: "In these programs phonics is isolated from the act of reading; it involves drills for practice of its several principles; it is meaningless because these principles, although occasionally applied to words that are sometimes anchored in sentences, are seldom extended to the wider act of reading a paragraph or story" (Walcutt, Lamport & McCracken, 1974, p. 156).

On the other hand, a similar criticism of meaninglessness can always be charged to the initial lessons of the phonic/linguistic approaches, in that it is almost impossible to write meaningful prose if you have to restrict your choice of words to those that exhibit the phonetic element that your instruction has reached by that point. The most extreme examples are in the Merrill *Linguistic Readers*, "Dad had pins in bins. He had a pin for the fan. He had to tap the pin into the fan" (thus running a serious risk of electrocution) (reproduced in Walcutt, Lamport & McCracken, 1974, p. 165). But you can certainly make the same statement about the initial "stories" in the Lippincott series itself: "Run, rat, run. Run, run, run. Run to a red sun...Run, run, run" (McCracken & Walcutt, 1969, p. 17). The fact is that all beginning materials based on some kind of vocabulary or phonic control will sound stilted to a greater or lesser degree at the beginning levels. The important question, however, is not whether this bothers the teacher (which it often does), but whether it disturbs the child.

The Whole Language Movement, 1980 On

Implicit in my discussion so far is the underlying assumption that no matter what approach basal readers take, it is they that are the purveyors of reading instruction for American children. Whenever the Great Debate was discussed, the answer was always couched in terms of what should, or should not, be included in a basal reading series. In the early 1980s, however, an attack was launched on the very concept of basal reading instruction. Patrick Shannon, in a series of studies and analyses of the relationships among publishers, textbook selection committees, reading

experts, teachers and texts, used the constructs of sociological theory to evaluate American reading instruction (Shannon, 1983, 1989). One of the features identified by Shannon was the "rationalization" of the reading program into a series of sequenced skills and subskills. Another was "alienation," in which the compulsory use of basal series distances teachers both subjectively and objectively from their craft, "deskilling" them in the process (Shannon, 1989, p. 78).

The response that Shannon and others advocate in order to dismantle the "rationalization" of reading instruction is, of course, the whole language movement (Shannon, 1989, 1990), one of whose major themes is that basal reading series should be discarded and that children should learn to read from "real" books--children's fiction and nonfiction. Key leaders in this movement have been Kenneth and Yetta Goodman along with Donald Graves and his colleagues; together, they have had a major effect upon the integration of writing and reading within the first-grade classroom.

Almost from the start, the whole language movement won wholehearted support from thousands of teachers. Indeed, one of its most intriguing aspects has been its growth at the grass-roots level. Teachers formed teacher cooperatives, founded the Whole Language Umbrella (an organization that is dedicated to encouraging networking and research into whole language), and prepared books and guidelines for converts.

The reason for the appeal of the whole language philosophy to teachers, against the current of basal reading instruction, is not far to seek. Teachers consider whole language empowering (e.g. Rich, 1985). They believe that it restores them to their professionalism instead of reducing them to the role of executives of the mandates of a basal reading series. It is now the *teachers'* knowledge about children and language acquisition that is crucial to a class's success, not the scope and sequence dictated by whoever it is who decides upon what goes into or stays out of the basal reader.

Whole Language Theories

It is important, however, to examine the theories behind the whole language movement. (1) Reading, according to whole language proponents, involves multiple cue systems, semantic and syntactic as well as graphophonemic; successful word identification depends upon the simultaneous use of all these systems (Goodman, 1968). Readers do not actually see the print that they think they see, according to Frank Smith (1973), so the orthographic element is of minor importance. Reading is therefore held to be, in Goodman's classic phrase, a "psycholinguistic guessing game" (Goodman, 1967).

(2) Both learning to read and learning to write are believed to be like learning to listen and speak, and will therefore be accomplished naturally by exposure to a rich and supportive literacy environment. Children will spell more conventionally when they wish to communicate more effectively (Graves & Stuart, 1985). Indeed, "natural" is one of the movement's key metaphors (Moorman, Blanton & McLaughlin, 1994). Both assumptions, however, have come under attack, particularly by linguists (e.g., Liberman & Liberman, 1992).

These theories have had profound consequences upon the teaching of literacy: each in its own way has led proponents of whole language to downgrade the importance of phonics and spelling

instruction. Kenneth Goodman has put it as follows: we used, he said, "to think we facilitated learning to read by breaking written language into bite-size pieces for learners. Instead, we turned it from easy-to-learn language into hard-to learn abstractions" (Goodman, 1976, p. 12). As a result, instruction in more than a few letter-sound correspondences (mainly consonants) is largely discredited among the majority of those who *write* about whole language (as opposed, in many cases, to those who actually use it in the classroom). Moreover, direct instruction in individual phonic elements is frowned upon: "Learning to make sense of print in reading or express sense in writing," as Goodman wrote in 1992, "does not require learning letter-sound relationships in isolation" (Goodman, 1992, p. 60).

The small role to be played by phonics instruction within the whole language movement can be seen in a couple of examples of how these theories are translated into practice. Both are found in professional publications designed to help whole language teachers and published by the International Reading Association (IRA) or the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE).

The first is taken from one of IRA's many publications on whole language, a book edited by Shirley Raines titled *Whole Language Across the Curriculum* (1995). None of the terms "word recognition," "word attack," or "phonics" is listed in the index. My example comes from Shirley Raines's own contribution, "A First Grade Teacher Becomes a Whole Language Teacher." Terri, the exemplary first-grade teacher modeling whole language teaching, is tackling word recognition and has already taught the children a cloze strategy for identifying unknown words. Now she turns to the strategy of using initial consonants. In reading *Frog and Toad are Friends* (Lobel, 1970), a child is trying to decode the word *porch*, which he has skipped the first time he read it. The teacher now reads aloud to him, "'Frog and Toad sat on the 'blank,' feeling sad together.' The child looks at the picture and says, 'stoop.' Then he says, 'No it can't be stoop, it doesn't start with 's'; it's a 'p'." The teacher then reads the sentence again, and the child says "porch" (Raines, 1995, p. 29). My simple question is, why hasn't this child already been taught that O R is the eminently consistent spelling for the sound /or/, and /c/ the first choice for C H, so that he can decipher "porch" on his own, and use his syntactic and semantic skills to verify that the pronunciation he has come up with matches a word in his speaking vocabulary, rather than trusting to context and an initial consonant to supply the word? What happens if there is no picture? And how can he ever pronounce a word that is not already in his speaking vocabulary?

My second example focuses on invented spelling and comes from an NCTE publication. It was, until the IRA's publication of Dorothy Strickland's booklet on phonics in 1998, the only one I have been able to find published by either the IRA or NCTE that devoted a whole publication to the place of phonics in a whole language program (or in any other kind of program, for that matter). It is called *Looking Closely: Exploring the Role of Phonics in One Whole Language Classroom* (Mills, O'Keefe and Stephens, 1992). In one of its chapters, the authors trace the development over the course of the school year of three children in this at-risk first-grade classroom. Jessica began her invented spelling in September with random letters. By the end of first grade, Jessica had certainly learned to treat writing as meaningful communication, which is a tribute to her teacher. Her last piece of writing, composed in May, reads in part, after she has written that she is seven: "my frd is spid the nit. wei mad a plnt!" (Mills, et al., 1992, p. 43).

My simple question is, given that Jessica has an excellent ability to segment phonemes and represents *night* and *made* with great accuracy in terms of her own orthography by using the

appropriate vowels, why hasn't she been taught, after a whole year, some generalizations, such as the silent-final-e rule, so that she can spell more consistently in standard spelling? (Children were being taught this rule in 1596--"he is made mad" [Coote, 1596, p. 15; Hart, 1963, p. 147]). The rule would cover *made* and many other words she uses, and the teacher should choose how to present the *igh* of *night* to her--whether as "a three-letter *i*" (Spalding & Spalding, 1957/1990), as the rime *ight*, or as an exception. In fact, in this classroom the *children* were more interested in *teaching* spelling than their own teacher: a group of them put rhyming words on the board, like *he*, *see*, *we*, and *me*, and explained them to their peers!

Many parents have reacted angrily to spelling performances of this kind. Ethel Buchanan, a Canadian whole language advocate who has published on spelling and believes that it is important for the child to master conventional spelling, has identified the potentially damaging consequences for the whole language approach. As she puts it, "I believe that if anything is going to defeat the whole language movement, it will be the way we handle spelling" (Buchanan, 1994, p. 181). Parents value correct spelling, and what is charmingly idiosyncratic in a four-year-old seems no longer to be so in a seven-year-old.

Teacher training

But, in my view, there have also been other factors at work that have exacerbated this situation. There are at least six factors that have contributed, historically, to teachers' distrust of the value of knowing about the phonology and orthography of English and to their reluctance to communicate this knowledge directly to children. They are, not necessarily in order of importance, first, a disrespect for history; second, the lingering effects of the professional backlash against *Why Johnny Can't Read*; third, a division in turf between the reading professionals and the learning disabilities specialists, which is directly related to the legislation of, and funding provided by, federal and state governments since the passage of the law for children with disabilities (Public Law 94-142); fourth, an ironic consequence of tossing the basal reading series out of the whole language classroom, and with it one of the last sources of detailed information on phonics; fifth, the split between practitioners in the classroom and researchers into the reading process; and sixth, the failure of teacher training programs to inform teachers about orthography and phonology (Monaghan, 1997). Of these, I shall talk in any depth only about the last.

Long before the advent of the whole language movement, precise information about phonics had already been excluded from the vast majority of books written on how to teach reading--but for different reasons, depending on the date of the three relevant periods: (1) pre-Flesch (1917-1955); (2) post-Flesch but pre-Chall (1956-1966); and (3) post-Chall (after 1967). If you will bear with me, a little review of books designed to help teachers teach reading is in order.

In the pre-Flesch era, authors of handbooks for teachers talked very little about the nitty-gritty of phonics, because, as we know, it ranked so low on the list of word attack skills. However, precise phonic information was available in works on reading remediation--where phonics was regarded as a useful tool--such as Edward Dolch's *A Manual for Remedial Reading* (1945), or Donald Durrell's *Improvement of Basic Reading Abilities* (1940), or Samuel Kirk's *Teaching Reading to Slow-Learning Children* (1940).

In the interlude between Flesch and Chall, the first professional reaction, as I mentioned earlier, was to blast explicit phonics. But, as passions subsided with the passage of time, a couple of professionals wrote books that focused directly on the topic of phonics, such as Dolores Durkin's *Phonics and the Teaching of Reading* (1962/1965) or Anna Cordts' *Phonics for the Reading Teacher* (1965); both of them gave considerable information on phonics within the context of intrinsic/analytic phonics--of phonic insights gleaned from sight words. There were also books authored by scholars outside the reading profession, who were attacking the sight approach to reading instruction and who valued letter-sound correspondences--people like Emerald DeChant, who wrote a book in 1964 called *Improving the Teaching of Reading*.

In the post-Chall era, one would have expected an increase in discussions of phonics in books for teachers. However, most writers for teachers in the 1970s still did not specify the content of phonics instruction in any detail. Instead, they routinely referred teachers to basal reading series, which they could now do because, thanks to Chall, the basal readers had begun to include more discussion of phonics, albeit in bits and pieces and in a disorganized way. Authors of handbooks for teachers, who were, of course, often authors of basal readers themselves, knew that teachers would find there, right in their own classrooms, information on the nitty-gritties of beginning consonant blends, silent final e's and so on and so forth. As the authors of *Fundamentals of Basic Reading Instruction* put it in 1973, "a very good guide to the scope and sequence of word-attack skills is the teacher's manual for most basal reading series" (Bamman, Dawson, & McGovern, 1973, p. 132).

Several books on phonics for teachers stemmed from the behaviorist movement of the 1970s--from skills-based instruction, where it was believed that reading could be learned by having its presumed components broken up into small pieces in all areas of instruction (comprehension and study skills, as well as decoding) and be taught and tested to "criterion." One offshoot of this was programmed reading instruction, and the publications of the 1980s saw a few such texts on phonics for teachers. The most enduring of these has been Marion Hull's *Phonics for the Teacher of Reading*, which was in its fifth edition by 1989. (It should not be considered a product of Chall's Great Debate because it first appeared in mimeograph form in 1966.)

Just how out of favor phonics was becoming once again, however, as the whole language movement got under full swing in the early 1980s, may be seen from a couple of other programmed texts designed to teach phonics to teachers: they are not typeset but appear as reproductions of typescripts (Logan, 1985; Rogers & Palardy, 1985)! Another text of the same period, a primer called *Prescription for Reading: Teach Them Phonics*, was authored by an optometrist enraged by parents who brought him children who couldn't read, but who had perfect eyesight, for eyetests. Illustrated by his daughter, it too was published from a typescript (Christman, 1983). Another, subtitled *Plugging a Hole in Whole Language*, was authored by an advocate of whole language, Thomas Cloer, after he had looked in vain for what he needed (Cloer, 1980/1993). These are hardly texts of the educational mainstream.

From 1990 to about 1995, there was a continuing dearth of easily-accessible texts that explained phonics to teachers. In 1991 Pat Cunningham published her *Phonics They Use* (1991/1995), but it depends heavily upon children's remembering chunks of old words in order to decode new ones by consonant substitution, and so should be classified as an intrinsic phonics approach. Kenneth Goodman's *Phonic Phacts* (1993) did discuss letter-sound correspondences, but the work as a whole does not deviate from his earlier philosophy. One text published in the early

1990s that both covered the content of phonics and showed how to teach it illustrates once again how completely phonics had slipped outside the mainstream of contemporary reading instruction: Phyllis Fischer's *The Sounds and Spelling Patterns of English: Phonics for Teachers and Parents* (1993) was published by herself. "Missing from the current literature," she explains in her preface, "is an overview of the structure of our written words that provides readers with an understanding of how the sounds of English are paired with the spelling patterns" (Fischer, 1993, p. v). The year 1995, however, saw significant changes in some quarters; these are discussed below.

Another reason for the lack of teacher preparation in phonics is that, not only are there merely a handful of publications out there on phonology and orthography, but there are also few courses that discuss them adequately in teacher-training institutions. (If there were, there would undoubtedly be more texts published.) A factor in this has unquestionably been the adoption of the whole language philosophy by so many teacher-trainers. As Regie Routman, a whole-hearted advocate of whole language, has noted, "Many of those coming out of our universities say that they have the big picture, that they know about literature and response, but they don't have a clue about how to actually teach reading--the phonics, the strategies, the cueing systems. Several of them have told me that phonics was barely mentioned in their courses" (Routman, 1996, p. 103).

When those who train teachers do think that informing prospective teachers about the phonology and orthography of their own language is important, the results are instructive. In 1995 Louisa Moats surveyed 89 teachers for their linguistic and orthographic knowledge. The teachers averaged five years of teaching experience among them. She found that only 30 percent of them could explain when one used the letters ck in spelling; only a quarter of them knew that there were three phonemes, not two, in ox; and that virtually none of them could consistently identify consonant digraphs. When she taught them about the phonology and orthography of English, 85 to 93 percent of each of her classes rated their new linguistic knowledge as either "highly useful" or "essential" in their teaching, no matter what subject they taught (Moats, 1995).

So a conjunction of forces, including a theoretical stance that has consistently downgraded the importance of letter-sound relationships, has combined to deprive teachers of important knowledge about the phonological and orthographical features of their own language. In other words, this has led to the "deskilling" of teachers, to adapt a Patrick Shannon term, in the whole language classroom. Teachers today, especially the younger ones, probably know less about the phonology and orthography of their own language than at any other time in the long and honorable history of American reading instruction. Moreover, not only do teachers not know about orthography, but they often don't want to know. And why should they? They have been informed that the theoretical underpinnings of whole language do not require them to know it.

But even those who do now proclaim that phonics matters downgrade the importance of knowing specific information about letter-sound correspondences. Instead, they emphasize the standard decoding strategies of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s: guessing from the context and initial consonants. This, for instance, is Regie Routman's 1996 advice on how to attack unfamiliar words.

Reading Strategies for Unknown Words

- Skip the difficult word.
Read on to end of sentence or paragraph.
Go back to the beginning of sentence and try again.

- Read on.
Reread inserting the beginning sound of the unknown word.
- Substitute a word that makes sense.
- Look for a known chunk or small word.
Use finger to cover part of word.
- Read the word using only beginning and ending sounds.
Read the word without the vowels.
- Look at the picture cues.
- Link to prior knowledge.
- Predict and anticipate what could come next.
- Cross check.

"Does it sound right?"

"Does it make sense?"

"Does it look right?"

- Self-correct and self-monitor.
- Write words you can't figure out and need to know on Post-its.
- Read passage several times for fluency and meaning.

Use errors as an opportunity to problem solve.

By Regie Routman (p. 198)

Almost all the features of what Chall called the "conventional wisdom" are enshrined in this advice. There are context cues/clues, structural clues ("a known chunk"), and picture clues. The only piece missing from William S. Gray's 1948 list of clues, discussed earlier, is configuration clues. Phonic clues embrace only beginning and ending consonants. Vowels are explicitly excluded as a source of decoding insight. It is the conventional wisdom revived and reincarnated in its whole language dress.

Public Perceptions

Perhaps none of this would particularly matter if the public perceived whole language instruction to be working. But many parents have been dismayed to discover that their children have not learned to read. To buttress this perception, they can now point, rightly or wrongly, to the test results of California children. California led the country in 1987 in adopting a literature-based elementary curriculum. No other state threw itself so wholeheartedly into whole language and literature-based instruction. But by 1994 its fourth-grade proficiency scores had slid almost to the bottom of the 41 states and territories that participated in the 1994 National Assessment of Education Progress (Campbell, Donahue, Reese, & Phillips, 1996). In fairness, it should be pointed out that at the same time California was experiencing massive cuts in school funding. This, however, was not what parents blamed for the decline. (For a contrary position, see McQuillan, 1998, pp. 12-14.)

Just as they did in the 1950s, parents have once again blamed the schools for not teaching phonics. And not just any old phonics--they have complained about the lack of precisely the "kuh-a-tuh, cat" kind of phonics that Flesch had advocated--systematic, explicit instruction in letter-sound correspondences along with blending, as opposed to the "embedded" and minimalist phonics of whole language. Moreover, thanks to the philosophical position taken by whole language

advocates, the debate is invariably couched in a "whole language" versus "phonics" format, as if the two, in the public mind, were totally incompatible. When members of the whole language community respond that of course they teach phonics, parents do not believe them.

Parents have gone to remarkable lengths to restore explicit phonics instruction to the schools: they have sought redress, as they see it, from their state legislatures. Bills have been introduced mandating the use of phonics in Alabama, California, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin. Of these, many have been either defeated or shelved, but in Alabama, California and Ohio the legislation has become state law. California's law, for one, is very specific about the kind of phonics it wants: the "fundamental skills of all subject areas," it says, are to be included in the curriculum, "including, but not limited to, systematic, explicit phonics, spelling, and basic computational skills." The section with these provisions was added to the existing Education Code and signed into law in October 1995 as an "emergency statute." Its status as an emergency was supported by citing the "poor performance of pupils who took the California Learning Assessment System (CLAS) and the National Assessment of Education Progress tests" (1995 Cal ALS 765).⁴

The American press, of course, has become interested in the furor, and magazines and newspapers alike invariably depict it as a phonics versus whole language issue and make accurate distinctions between the kind of phonics parents mean and the kind practiced in the whole language movement. A front-page article in the *Los Angeles Times* in December 1996 characterized the phonics taught within whole language as teaching children to "rely heavily on pictures to figure out the words. They are encouraged to notice the first and last letters of words and to guess at those they cannot figure out" (Duff, 1996). Other papers remark on the ideological leanings of the participants and note that phonics, like politics, makes strange bedfellows. This headline appeared on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal* in October 1996: "ABCeething/ How Whole Language/ Became a Hot Potato/ In and Out of Academia/ Reading Method Ditched/ Phonics, Won Adherents/ But Test Scores Tanked/ A Boomer-Christian Coalition" (Duff, 1996).

The Canadian press is also having a good time with the corresponding fuss in Canada, which embraced whole language warmly in the 1980s. Whereas in 1988 Canada was being hailed as "A leader in whole-language instruction" (McCaughy, 1988), by 1993 the Canadian magazine *Maclean's* was featuring articles on whole language and phonics titled, guess what, "The reading debate" (Young, 1993), and by the fall of 1995 the Canadian magazine *Saturday Night* was running one titled "Why schools can't teach," with the subhead, "Phonetics replaced by whole language learning in Canada" (Nikiforuk & Howes, 1995). In Canada, in fact, the situation is viewed by some as even more dire than in the United States. The results of the 1994 reading tests for fourth-graders in the province of British Columbia, where whole language had been the prevailing approach, were so awful that they were never released: there were so many scores that had to be disqualified--incomplete tests or scores below 25 percent--that there were not enough left for an adequate database (Nikiforuk & Howes, 1995).

Publishers have also, of course, pricked up their ears. There has been a spate of programs, often including audiotapes and video-tapes, that purport to teach phonics. *Hooked on Phonics*, for instance, started up in 1987 with a modest budget of \$150,000. By 1993 it was making \$110 million a year--until the Federal Trade Commission caught up with it and made it sign a consent decree admitting it had been running unsubstantiated advertising (Darlin, 1996). The point is not

whether *Hooked on Phonics* delivered what it promised (it presumably didn't), but why on earth two million people should spend some \$250 each to purchase it, when they were already spending their hard-earned tax dollars on having their children taught to read in the public schools.

There is an added twist to all this, and that is its ideological aspect. The most vocal supporters of systematic phonics are often those of the most politically conservative slant. From Robert Dole on down (Dole made his contempt for whole language part of his presidential campaign in 1996), conservatives have advocated, advertised and fought for the restoration of phonics to the curriculum. The work of the Virginia-based, conservative National Right to Read Foundation is well-known in this regard as a focus of pro-phonics activism.

But, as the *Wall Street Journal's* headline of "[Baby] Boomer-Christian Coalition" suggested, by no means all those who advocate phonics happen to be conservatives. Because, however, the conservatives have a tendency to talk louder than other groups, an ideological split has emerged that has already become a stereotype: on the liberal/conservative continuum, whole language is of course placed in the liberal camp, while explicit phonics is regarded as the prized possession of the conservatives.

The net result is that when whole language advocates feel themselves to be under seige, they are quick to seize upon the ideological divide to attack those who suggest they should be doing something different (see Foorman, 1995). There is still, just as there was in Flesch's heyday, an emotional response to the very word "phonics." In 1985, when *Becoming a Nation of Readers* was published, one of its recommendations was that teachers should present "well-designed phonics instruction" that presents the letters and their sounds both in isolation and in context, along with sounding out and blending (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985, p. 118). As whole language proponents reacted to the book, they castigated it for its focus on phonics and its lack of attention to meaning. When NCTE decided to act as one of the book's distributors, it did so only after much heartsearching. Whole language advocates noted how successful the book had been politically, winning "the enthusiastic acceptance of the Far Right" (Davidson, 1988, p. 107). Similarly, Marilyn Adams's important summary of research on basic reading processes (1990), which led her to conclude that reading was emphatically not a "psycholinguistic guessing game," was greeted derisively by some whole language supporters as a return to "a simple machine-like technology" (Flurkey & Meyer, 1994, p. 12).

The charges leveled by some on the other side are even more inflammatory: one writer for the National Right to Read Foundation, for instance, delights in vocabulary like "edu-babble" and "phony phonics," invokes the mantle of Rudolf Flesch, and encourages parents to whip their children out of the public school if they are displeased with what is going on there (Elam, 1996).

Conclusion and Recommendations

We have come to a pretty pass when laypersons feel so strongly about the inadequacies of current philosophies of reading instruction that they resort to legislation. None of us should rejoice at this turn of events.

But are their concerns justified? What are we to make of the findings of a recent study that explored what some 1,200 classroom teachers thought about how to teach reading? The study's

major conclusion was that "A majority of teachers embraced a balanced, eclectic approach to elementary reading instruction, blending phonics and holistic principles and practices" (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hester, 1998, p. 611). This finding seems to contradict all the evidence I have presented above.

Have both the public and the press distorted what good teachers do, at a time when teachers have resolved the "Great Debate" for themselves pragmatically? The answer may be "yes" and "no." Good teachers have always drawn what they liked from a given approach and disregarded the rest, and it certainly rings true that pragmatism has won out over dogmatism. But that is not the same as saying that the debate has been futile. Even on the admission of some of the most ardent advocates of whole language, new teachers have been inadequately prepared to teach phonics (on Regie Routman's evidence), and parents have legitimate concerns over spelling (according to Ethel Buchanan). It was parents, remember, who revolted against the current situation, not the press; the press has simply been having a field day ever since.

I therefore think that we may draw three conclusions and one major recommendation from the history of what has happened. The first is that there is still a yawning gulf between proponents of explicit phonics and the kind of phonics advocated by champions of whole language. The latter group does not believe that phonics is a major key to decoding, and therefore does not teach children much phonics. In this, there has been no shift in sentiment over the last 50 years, ever since Gray's five principles of word attack. Should we or should we not, as well as teaching a child that the letter P "says" "puh" (on which there is now almost universal agreement), also teach him the digraphs and vowel combinations of the written language, so that a child can decode a word like *porch* himself instead of guessing it from the context and its initial consonant? There remains a genuine area of disagreement and broad misunderstanding between the two sides on this issue.

I myself feel that we have a moral and intellectual obligation to provide children with more phonic information than is common in most of the classrooms of today. It is nonsense, for instance, to think that children cannot and should not be taught at least the most important of the final silent -e rules, the "magic-e" one that indicates the "long" pronunciation of the vowel. Children have mastered that rule for centuries: recall the "he is made mad" of Edmund Coote in 1596. Children like explanations.

My second conclusion is that the great divide between whole language and explicit phonics instruction, as it is perceived by the public and the press, is one of the reading profession's (as opposed to classroom teachers') own making. It does not have to be that way: it is not an either/or choice, as the respondents to Baumann et al.'s study made clear (1998). It is perfectly possible--but only if one teaches a child *enough* about letter-sound-correspondences (LSCs)--to do both at the same time. Indeed, instruction in a large number of LSCs is potentially the quickest route to helping a child read naturalistic texts. A friend of mine who teaches in our local Brooklyn public school runs through the 72 Spalding phonograms each morning for ten minutes before devoting the rest of her first graders' schoolday to a completely whole language approach to which she is totally dedicated (Spalding & Spalding, 1957/1990).

The failure of so many practitioners to teach much phonics has landed the profession in yet another battle--over so-called "decodable" texts. Should we offer children only texts that exhibit the LSCs taught up to that point? (The Dad who "had to tap the pin in the fan," you will recall, was an

example of these.) The systematic-phonics *Open Court* readers are currently one of few contemporary exemplars of such "decodable" texts. Their rationale is that one cannot teach everything at once, and that children need step-by-step mastery. Again, that this should prove to be a dilemma is a product of the reading profession's own making, because it has recommended teaching so few LSCs and so late. Almost any text is potentially decodable if one teaches the child enough about spelling patterns.

My third point, therefore, is both a conclusion and a recommendation: change will only occur when teachers themselves come to appreciate the complexity and, dare I say, beauty, of the English sound-spelling/spelling-sound system. For this, we must alter how we prepare teachers along the lines suggested by Louisa Moats (Moats, 1995). Teachers need to know much more than they currently do about phonology and orthography--about their own speech system, and how the writing system works. New courses will be necessary. One of the unintended consequences of the integration of reading and writing in the elementary school--for the first time in the history of American literacy instruction--has been the halving of the time devoted to teaching teachers how to teach reading and writing. In the new climate, what were formerly two courses (one each in reading and writing) have been combined at most teacher education institutions into one, leaving prospective teachers with a mere three-hour course in which to master the foundations of all other instruction.

New books will be also be needed. It is a measure of how much professional opinion has shifted since the passage of the California law in 1995 that some promising titles are already in print (e.g. Eldredge, 1995; Fox, 1996). For those whole language adherents who balk at "dreary rule talk," as Lyn Wendon calls it (Wendon, 1990, p. 4), Wendon claims that her program, first published in England, avoids the dreariness by translating letters into pictorial metaphors, and rules into stories about the letter characters (Wendon 1987-1994). There are now even publications on the content of phonics from within the whole language community (e.g. Wilde, 1997). Hull's vintage programmed self-instructional text has appeared in its seventh edition (Hull & Fox, 1966/1998). At a more theoretical level, Richard Venezky's forthcoming *Letters and the noises they make* (his revision of *The Structure of English Orthography*) promises to be helpful (Venezky, 1970; in press).

There are other signs that the professional climate is changing. Last year the International Reading Association came out with a ringing declaration that it had believed in phonics all along (International Reading Association, 1997), and it has finally, after more than forty years of existence, actually published the first book ever to include the word "phonics" in its title (Strickland, 1998). (The work does not, however, explicate letter-sound correspondences themselves.) The new watchword among reading professionals is "balanced" reading instruction. (That used to mean, in the early 1960s, keeping phonics out. In a nice little historical irony, now it means letting phonics in!) Things are looking up.

This fuss about reading instruction is, in short, something that we in the reading profession have brought down squarely upon our own heads. But if we provoked it, we can also fix it. The key is not so much better taught children as better taught teachers. The better taught children will follow as a matter of course.

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² Blouke Carus, telephone communication, April 21, 1997.

³ Charles Walcutt and his colleagues identified only eight of them in 1974 (Walcutt, Lamport & McCracken, 1974, 156-159).

⁴ I am grateful to Jane Cramer of the Brooklyn College Library for searching the web for state legislation on this topic for me.