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ABSTRACT

A teacher's theoretical viewpoint is pervasive. It determines not only the materials chosen and the way the materials are used, but also the perception the teacher holds of the reading process. It is important, therefore, for teachers to understand the theory on which their views are based so that they can understand why they have chosen a particular book or basal. Basically, teachers use two different approaches to teach children to read: the synthetic/analytic approach and the holistic approach. Underlying each is a theoretical, psychological assumption of how children learn and how teachers relate to children during the learning process. Teachers using the synthetic/analytic approach present reading to children one piece of information at a time (letter, letter-sound relation, word)--from outside the children's realm of knowledge. The intent in this approach is to work on meaning after children have learned to read. In contrast, teachers using the holistic approach begin with what is meaningful for children and work from the inside out. Print is used in stories, directions, announcements, and other written forms that hold meaning for children. Teachers and prospective teachers need to understand the theoretical bases of both reading approaches and then identify with one or the other. This would stop the debate about which approach is better and allow teachers to consider what effects their choices have on students' conceptualizations of reading and reading performance. (FL)

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Stop the Debate 1

LET'S STOP THE "DEBATE" AND CONSIDER THE
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief overview of reading approaches being used in beginning reading instruction. It is suggested that these approaches should be viewed philosophically and psychologically so that choices made in instructional materials and techniques are understood.

DESCRIPTORS: Beginning Reading Instruction: Theoretical Basis: Historical-philosophical Basis: Learning Theory: Instructional Debate

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LET'S STOP THE "DEBATE" AND CONSIDER THE
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

A RECENT article (Burton & Shumake, 1984) debated whether teachers should utilize basal readers or literature to teach reading. The authors' clear, concise, and equally well supported positions brought to mind the following:

...the differences between the personal viewpoints of different men correspond to the differences between the theoretical points of view of different scientists. (Kelly, 1955, p. 5)

A teacher's theoretical viewpoint is pervasive. It not only determines the materials chosen and the way the materials are used but the perception the teacher holds of the reading process.

Since instructional preferences are theoretically based in assumptions of how children learn, it appears unlikely that these dichotomous approaches will ever win the other one over. What seems important is understanding the theory on which each position is based so that we as teachers understand why we have chosen a particular book or basal. In addition to the type of book chosen, it also seems important to consider what is behind the cover for basals as well as literature books vary considerably: The

dichotomy lies in how different teachers think children learn.

Basically, teachers are using two different approaches to teach children to read: the synthetic/analytic approach and the holistic approach. Underlying each approach exists a theoretical, psychological assumption of how children learn and how teachers relate to children during the learning process (Harste & Burke, 1977). A diagram, adapted from Burke (1972) to include arrows and an additional wedge, illustrates the emphases of the two basic approaches (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure One About Here

Teachers using the synthetic/analytic approach present reading to children from outside their realm of knowledge with one piece of information at a time (e.g., letter, letter-sound relation, word). The intent in this approach is to work on meaning (comprehension) after children have learned to read. In contrast, teachers using the holistic approach begin with what is meaningful for children and work from the inside of the circle out. Print is utilized in stories, directions, announcements, and other written forms that hold meaning for children,

and parts of the outer circles are pulled into the inner circle as children's awareness and needs arise. Goodman (1970) suggested that mature readers simultaneously utilize three cueing systems (graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic) as they engage in processing the print. These cueing systems are consistent with the diagram and were included to better describe the major differences in the approaches and their basic learning theories. Otto (1982) suggested that these approaches require learners to use either a phonic or meaning emphasis.

Synthetic Approach/Analytic Approach

The synthetic approach emphasizes the sound-symbol correspondence (graphophonic) in which children are taught the letters, sounds of letters, letter-sound combinations, and then how to combine them to pronounce words. Instructional materials reflecting the synthetic approach have been developed for teaching beginning reading that are phonemic, phonetic, and alphabetic.

The analytic approach starts with a set of basic words or high frequency words and controls the text through repetitive use of these particular word units. Different instructional materials vary the recommended word sets from high frequency words, "word families" (e.g., cat, sat, rat), picture words or rebus, to word sets that children generate. The characteristic that

distinguishes this approach is that word units are initially presented out of environmental and/or print context. After the words are recognized "at sight" they can then be combined to compose sentences or reduced to sound and related to phonic generalizations.

Methods classified either synthetic or analytic vary in sequence of introducing the vowel sounds, consonants, letters, or words. They have in common an underlying psychological base that views the learner as passive and assumes that the teacher must present a planned sequence of instruction that moves from part to whole. The teacher begins with decoding (Samuels, 1977) and continues to build to "create comprehension" (Holmes, 1953).

A historical-philosophical base can be found in John Locke's (1632-1704) "tabula rasa" theory in which a person is viewed as building-up and storing impressions. A person, according to this theory, is not considered to be able to think critically. Students are completely dependent on their tutor/teacher to give them the "right" experiences so that the right way can be gradually absorbed to dominate their thinking (Brubacher, 1966). This behavioristic view of reading suggests that children have to be trained by stimulus, response, and reinforcement to reproduce precise sound and letter representations (Otto, 1982) or word units. This approach

is generally found in commercially produced basal series in which skills in word recognition, comprehension, and study skills are coordinated, sequenced, and arranged from kindergarten through sixth grade.

Holistic Approach

The holistic approach emphasizes the semantic cueing system and views learners as interactively involved in a thinking process. Smith (1975) suggested that "...comprehension means making sense" (p. 10) and relating the already known to new experiences. The whole personality acts as a guide in creating meaning from the print. In an explanation of the psychological theory of George Kelly (1955), Bannister and Fransella (1980) considered the fundamental postulate to imply that the "...personality is the way you go about making sense of the world" (p. 17). The holistic view of reading or instruction and the personal construct psychology of Kelly converge on many points. Both view the person as an intelligent, creative whole who is concerned with making sense of the world. Both begin with the person and the semantic realm in trying to gain an understanding of that individual.

Many of the fundamental views that the holistic approach advocates can be philosophically traced to Pestalozzi (1746-1827) and his admonishments to: (a)

educate the entire child; (b) place the child, not subject matter, at the center of the process; (c) connect the unknown to what the child already knows; (d) make education a natural process; (e) base teaching on what is familiar to the child; (f) use relevant, practical subject matter that draws from actual circumstances; and (g) tell the child as little as possible by permitting discovery and self instruction (Butts, 1955).

During the early part of this century, however, the most prevalent learning theory used by teachers in reading instruction was behaviorally based. Since that time, reading researchers (e.g., Goodman & Goodman, 1981) have encouraged teachers to return to a "humanistic acceptance of the learner" (p. 3) similar to those views proposed by Pestalozzi. The revival of this emphasis can be linked to Gestalt psychologists who influenced reading teachers to broaden their "field" from phonemes, letters, and words to context. Additional influences have been from researchers such as Piaget (1954), who looked at how learners' processes affect and influence their perceptions, and Gibson (1969) who found three trends in perceptual development: (a) the ability to discriminate with increasing specificity; (b) the ability to focus and utilize attention; and (c) the ability to economically search and select information. His findings suggested

that as children become readers, they work on the pieces of language (e.g., letters, words), not the other way around.

Educators utilizing this approach in teaching beginning reading instruction use language experience, literature, and trade books that are written simply but with natural syntax or word order. Literature and supplemental reading books containing rhyme, repetition, rhythm, or context that can be predicted become the texts for beginning readers. Reading instruction, considered a process, finds expression in group and individual situations with unsequenced materials. The process is thought to be best accomplished by trusting children's sensitive systems (Holdaway, 1979) and relating to children's systems from the semantic realm (Goodman & Goodman, 1979).

Teachers and perspective teachers need to understand the theoretical basis of both reading approaches and then identify with one or the other. A theoretical understanding would permit teachers to stop debating and move on to considering what effects their choices have on students' conceptualizations of reading and reading performance.

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Footnote

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Figure 1. Differing emphases of reading approaches.

