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ABSTRACT

The voice of the government via the Reading Excellence Act gives the message that direct systematic intense phonics instruction will solve the reading problem, end debate, lead to student success in life beyond school, and provide teachers with the prestige of successful reading instruction. This paper takes a close look at systematic direct intense phonics instruction in one primary classroom to reveal that such programs teach more than the sounds that letters make. Several subsections in the paper consider the definition of reading, the role of teacher knowledge, the children's experience, the definition and nature of curriculum, the place of culturally responsive pedagogy, and what role each of these plays in the phonics program. The paper's critical analyses demonstrate that students and teachers are held as "curriculum hostages" in a variety of ways. Finally the paper suggests options for teachers and researcher actions. (Contains 29 references.) (NKA)

Phonics Exposed:
Understanding and Resisting Systematic Direct Intense
Phonics Instruction*

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Paper presented at the annual conference of the National Council of Teachers of English
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Abstract

A close look at systematic direct intense phonics instruction in one primary classroom reveals that such programs teach more than the sounds that letters make. Critical analyses demonstrate that students and teachers are held as curriculum hostages in a variety of ways. Options for teacher and researcher actions are suggested.

Karen and her students are living within the tense zone generated by the many disagreements about the teaching of reading. Government sponsored groups (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998), researchers (Coles, 2000), church groups, think tanks, and legislators have entered that zone and increasingly place harsh and often ambiguous demands on reading pedagogy. The many voices in this “never-ending debate” (Smith, 1992, p. 432) have contributed to the construction of an air of hysteria and urgency about reading and readers. Alongside the cries about poor readers and ineffective instruction, are articulate responses describing the intensity of the debate as a “manufactured crisis” (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). In the midst of this swirling mass of doubt and rebuttal about teacher efficacy and student performance, the confusion grows louder as we see newscasts of crying children preparing for reading tests and anxious teachers and parents awaiting test results that affect funding, salaries, and student promotion. The voice of the government via the Reading Excellence Act gives the message that direct systematic intense phonics instruction will solve the reading problem, end the debate, lead to student success in life beyond school, and provide teachers with the prestige of successful reading instruction.

But, there is one consistently absent view in what feels like perpetual noise about the teaching and learning of reading. The missing view—the one taken in this presentation—is the view from a classroom of children and their teacher.

The Phonics Lesson

I arrive in the first grade classroom as the children are completing their morning news. The date has been decided upon and entered onto the calendar and the news from one child is being written on large chart paper. The class rereads the news together. The teacher, Karen, tells the children it is time for phonics. It is a little before 10:00.

Karen introduces the story for the day. This is a “you blend them story” she tells the group of 18 children, 10 girls and 8 boys. They wriggle to attention and the teacher begins to read the old fable of the crow and the fox. You know the story; the fox wants the cheese

from the very vain crow; the crow is holding the cheese in her beak. The fox tells the crow that she can't sing that well; when the crow sings, to convince the fox that she can sing, she drops the cheese and the fox eats it.

But, in this classroom, on this day, the scenario is different because this is a "you blend" story. The teacher begins telling the story.

Karen read, "Once there was a c-r-ow," and as she comes to the word crow she makes the sounds for /k/ /r/ and long o. The children all scream (or most of them) "crow!" As the teacher continues through the story, she stops at every fifth word or so and says the sounds (phonemes) that make up the word. She is reading from a scripted lesson that tells her what to say. The children can not see the story; they are listening only. The teacher barks f-o-x, l-u-n-ch, sh-i-ne, v-oi,ce, b-ea-k, and n-o-ne, following the script that demands that she bark these particular words. After the story, there is a brief discussion, but it seems to me that the children who said they were familiar with the fable could answer the questions. I, too, had lost the thrust of the story until I stopped to remind myself that I knew it already. Karen tells me later that the students who knew the answers to or responded to the story were her strong readers.

By 10:00 the story is completed. The children are asked to look at the marker board at the front of the room. The teacher writes "superman" on the board. Two children call it out right away; they seem to be precocious readers.

The teacher erases the n on superman and puts a d at the end to make the non-word, supermad. Perhaps you will argue that it is a word. One of the children suggested it meant that you were very mad at someone, you "are supermad at them." Next the teacher puts an n back, in place of the d, but then places a d after the n to make supermand. Saying the whole thing very slowly, the children work to say the non-word. They look at the teacher; "What is supermand?" asks one. The teacher says it is not a word.

At this point, I am wondering what we are teaching the children about reading.

She writes baboon next and changes it to baboot.

Next, the children struggle to read 'alphabet'; they know what that is. The teacher changes it to alphabed. Some children chuckle; others read the word and wait for the next word.

They make schoolbus into schoolbun; the teacher suggests that maybe in school your hot dog goes on a schoolbun. They struggle to read recess as it is changed into reced (re-said, is how the teacher said it).

At 10:05 the teacher suggests, "Let's get out Itchy." Itchy is the puppet that the kids have named. "Figure out what Itchy is doing today," the teacher says. She holds the puppet facing her; she says "Maze" She moves the puppets' lips and changes her voice and says zzzz. She says man, the puppet says nnnn. She says fish, the puppet says shshsh.

A child suggests that the puppet is saying the ending sound; the teacher confirms this and the children say the ending sound for these words, along with Itchy: sleep, touch, leak, meet, truck, treat, place, eat, please, teach.

Karen says, "Thank you for helping us," to Itchy and places him back in his box near her desk.

At 10:12 the teacher asks the ST to get the overhead projector in place. The teacher holds up a card with the upper and lower case d on them. She says the upper case D is a straight line down from the sky and a big fat tummy.

The lower case d is a circle and then a straight line down. She says this twice.

I look over the markerboard at the front of the room, where I expect to see the alphabet, but see blank cards, like the one the teacher was holding. Only five consonants are showing and one vowel, <a>. Karen turns the card over and there are the letters, again, and a picture of a dinosaur. The kids are very excited.

10:14: Sweep: children are: playing with thread on a sock and unraveling his sock; some are rocking and looking away, one is making bomb sounds (like a bomb falling). Two are picking their noses. One is playing with her ears. Another is massaging her braids. One is pushing her cuticles with another fingernail.

There is a story on the overhead about a dinosaur; Karen reads and points to the words. When they come to the parts of the story where **dd** is written, the kids have to say **duh duh** for dancing dinosaur sounds.

10:16 The overhead story is over; they didn't talk about what it was about.

I notice that the letter h, above the markerboard, has a picture of a dog under it. Later, the teacher will tell me that it is for /h/ /h/ /h/ /h/ hounddog, saying the sound of h four times before saying the word.

Karen tells the children to say these words back to her if they start with "duh duh"...dog, daisy, dance, foot, dark, wagon, doorman, paper, and the list goes on for about 12 words. The children fall into these categories in terms of their responding: some kids say the correct answers, some kids echo the correct answers, some kids say all the words, some kids don't say anything.

At 10:19 The teacher tells the children that they seem very restless and wiggly because of all this phonics. I expect she will tell them that they'll go outdoors for a break; but instead she offers them a book about dinosaurs. She reads and shows them the pictures; the frustration stops as even the sock destroyer stops playing with the thread and listens and watches, engaged. Later, I will learn that he's a good reader and is quite bored by the phonics instruction that the district is mandating. The nose pickers stop picking their noses. The rocking that the children were engaged in has also stopped during the reading of the story. Indeed, the tenor of the children's relationships with their teacher, with each other, and with text has changed.

The kids graph the copyright date and figure out how many years ago the book was written. As she reads, the teacher is emotional and active and changes her voice for different characters. At 10:33 they discuss the story, including the genre. The kids write in their journals for 15 minutes before returning to the board area for more phonics instruction. The total time on phonics instruction, direct, intense and to the whole group, will be one hour.

But it isn't over yet. Karen calls them back to the carpeted area to continue phonics. They must do one full lesson each day.

They will read as the teacher changes dad to had to mad; then they change an to and to hand and change other onsets and rimes.

Once again, as I look around the group of children sitting closely together on the rug, but none really involved with the other, I see: a child picking her nose and examining the findings, one child poking another, one pulling at the rug, the sock child is, once again, tearing at his clothing, one child talks to a friend, one sits and rocks and twists his ears, one unbraids and braids her hair, one sucks his bracelet, one is squatting, rather than sitting on her bottom, one is rolling, and one is styling her cuticles. Without looking up, some answer mechanically, others ignore.

The teacher has the children pick up letter cards with : m, n, c, d, and a on cards. The a is red; the rest are black.

The kids make mad and discuss the sounds of each letter in mad. One makes dam and is accused of making a bad word, but the teacher clarifies that this is a thing that holds water back, not the bad word. One says he could make candy if he had a y but the teacher says "That is harder than we're supposed to make." This is the only time Karen looks over the children at me and her eyes fill with tears.

When I ask her about it later, she says that the program is too hard for some of her children and bores other. It's just not for everyone. When I asked her about that she said that at a district inservice she was told by one of the program's consultants to "Trust me, this program is good for all you students."

The closing part of the lesson involves the distribution of a "book" that is supposed to be decodable because the words are limited to short a words. The book fits on one piece of paper, folded in half, and has been photocopied for the entire class.

Each page has an illustration that shows a man angry about where the cat sleeps (on the welcome mat, on the mouse pad at the computer, and in the pan he wants to cook with; he

leaves the house with his hat as the cat sleeps in his cap). The kids read, barking the unnatural text; there is little to discuss in this book. The teacher says they may color it later on.

The children are asked to put the book in their book bag, which has other books that they can read. Some are reading rather complex pieces; others have very easy and predictable books. They've had four other books like The Cat and have the teacher has a book of blackline masters filled with many more for her to run off for the kids to read during the year. Total time excluding the time for the real book and journal writing: 60 minutes.

When K told her district reading administrator that the lessons took from 60-90 minutes each day, she was told that she has a "personal problem." When Karen asked about her decision making power because ALL students must be in the program (no one leaves for ESL, Reading Recovery or anything else), Karen says:

I was told by [a district reading administrator] that for too long teachers in this district have thought that their job was to create curriculum. I was told that is not our job. Our job is to 'deliver' [she makes quote signs in the air with her fingers] curriculum.

Interpretations of the Lesson

Each of the following subsections offers a way of interpreting the phonics lesson. By considering the role that each of these plays in the phonics program, I suggest that its efficacy is limited, at best: the definition of reading, the role of teacher knowledge, the children's experience, the definition and nature of curriculum, and the place of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994)

What is Reading?

Karen's students are learning what reading is by the way it is operationally enacted day-to-day in school and out. The focus here is *in* school. Although Karen refers to it as "phonics," the children are learning (from the script that constantly says "read...") that

reading is making sounds. They are learning that reading is the production of something orally so that we can move on. Say reced or schoolbun and move on. Although we heard the children's quest to find meaning in some of these words, the intention of the program is to have children string together sounds. The final consonant substitution activity teaches children to expect non-meaning as an accepted reality of reading. Say baboot and move on. Remember, Karen tells a child, "It's not a word," when that child asked about supermand. Being told to *read* a word (by the script) and that what they read is not a word (by their teacher) is confusing at best and may, in a larger sense, be teaching children that their reading is not supposed to make sense and that they are not meaning-makers (Wells, 1986). That's a seriously negative lesson to teach for a full hour each day.

Successfully calling out non-words, saying isolated sounds, blending words others say in parts (when Karen said /f/ /o/ /x/ and the children were to say *fox*), and the other parts of the phonics lesson have a contextually-limited arena for usefulness. That arena is limited to time in the program in school. Willis (1997) would define this type of reading as: something you have to do to succeed in school; that is different than seeing it as needed to read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987) by transacting (Rosenblatt, 1978) with texts.

Perhaps the students that the lessons are meant to address most, beginning readers with a limited understanding of what reading is, are learning the most unintended lesson; they're learning that reading is a mess of sounds that they say, but that they can't rely upon to be meaningful. This stands in sharp contrast to the lessons Karen teaches throughout the rest of the day, when her goal is that children appropriate important questions readers ask themselves, such as "*Does it make sense?*" or "*What does it mean?*"

Teacher Knowledge

This program leaves no decisions in the minds of the teacher. The teacher can not decide who needs such intense work with sounds, how much, and for how long each day. The district demands that all teachers do it everyday. The company representative said, "Trust

me. This program is good for every child in your class.” Karen does not have that kind of trust because she is a smart teacher. Her decision-making has been appropriated by the district’s withdrawal of trust in her as an informed professional.

Karen is informed. She attends and presents at national conferences, earned a masters degree, and continues to read and take courses at a local university. She is a learner as well as a teacher. Karen knows about the knowledge base in reading (Braunger & Lewis, 1997) and she also knows that the present climate in the district is one that is saturated with “efforts to deskill and control teaching by limiting...teachers’ autonomy” (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 10). Teacher knowledge and informed decision-making ends for 60 minutes each day when Karen follows the enforced script.

And it is enforced. Administrators and district office representatives visit Karen’s school to make sure that the scripts are followed. “It’s the phonics police...the curriculum cops,” she says. District administrators attended meetings about the program, as Karen explains:

“[An administrator said] that teachers in this district have acted as though they are self-employed and that they are not self-employed and they need to stop acting as though they are.”

“What does that mean?” I ask her.

“It means,” Karen’s eyes once again fill with tears, “that we are not allowed to think for ourselves or make decisions.”

It means teachers will follow the mandate or find other employment. Following such meetings, Karen complied. For the first year of the mandate, she taught phonics by the script.

The Children’s Point of View

Karen is a “systematic observer” (Taylor, 1993, p. 34) of children who is smart about child development, teaching, and learning. But her smartness is bracketed during phonics when the program usurps her power to respond to what her children’s behaviors are telling

her. Karen confirmed my observations that her students consistently fall into three categories during phonics lessons. One group is with the lesson, following Karen and making efforts to respond. This tends to be some of the children who are already reading, some that might benefit from such an intense structure, and some very polite children. The second group is the echo group. They repeat what others say but do not necessarily understand the content or purpose of the lesson (Bloome, 1983). The third group includes silent students and the ones who call out anything.

The children's behaviors indicate their responses to the content of the lesson. Finding phonics cognitively and affectively barren, many initiate and communicate (by their actions) a search for stimulation, contact, and meaning (Snell and Brown, 2000). They find it in their noses, along their ears, and in their clothing. They find it as they suck a bracelet or touch a friend. Their behaviors communicate the mismatches between learners, curriculum, and the interactions children expect in a social learning setting (Durand, 1990). The phonics lesson forces kids to have "tunnel vision" (Smith, 1997, p. 25) about reading as they focus on sounds, rather than reading to construct meaning. In contrast, large group lessons like the book reading allow for all to participate because children can learn a broad spectrum of reading strategies as they learn about the reading process.

The children's diverse needs are bracketed during the phonics lessons. That bracketing is why Karen tolerates some of the children's aberrant behaviors at this time of the day. She can not in good conscience ask them to focus on something that is meaningless to them. That's one reason she looked up teary-eyed during the lesson. She understands that the bracketing of her knowledge is also the bracketing of her students' learning.

The Curriculum: More than the Sounds that Letters Make

Curriculum, according to Dewey (1938), is *what happens* in classrooms. It *may* be enriched by the many relationships that thrive at the intersections of definitions (teacher's and students') of reading, teaching, learning, language, cultures, and experiences. It *may* be multiple voices that join for a moment in an infinite conversation that began long before the

moment and will continue long after it (Bakhtin, 1996). Curriculum *may* be a setting for multiple possibilities of expression (Short & Harste with Burke, 1996). The phonics program, with its views of teachers as incapable and children as having little relevant experience about the sounds of the language, limits what *may* happen in school. The view of children as needing tiny bits of language, just a little at a time, with abrupt and frequent changes, and little regard for sense-making limits the possibilities of children's understanding and uses of language.

Karen is being held hostage by the curriculum because she fears being fired for noncompliance. She and other teachers were coerced into compliance with the program. Such coercion is a form of violence (Stuckey, 1991) because Karen's professionalism was systematically ripped away by threats and intimidation (violent tactics).

Karen's students are also being held hostage by the curriculum. This is another form of violence because the children's needs are systemically ignored (neglected). The phonics curriculum is a mold "for a cast-iron result" (Dewey, 1938, p. 72) and it is rooted in a one size fits all mentality that Ohanian (1999) decries as a "one size fits few" reality. No one in the district with decision-making power found it objectionable that one of the "pedagogical implications" (Perrone, 1991, p. 24) of the phonics program is that it teaches compliance. Children are being taught to comply as they sit and listen to meaning-absent lessons. This is clearly at odds with demands for higher performance and better readers that can become responsible and active members of a democracy.

Another facet of the phonics program as curriculum is that it is big business. Relying on the manufactured panic about reading scores, publishers move in to districts with strategic plans for convincing teachers (and many others) that the publisher's program can rescue students. As the publisher gets rich, the mandated program "dismiss[es] the possibilities of teaching and learning that exist as potentials waiting to be realized" (Meyer, 2001) in favor of profit and the promise of homogeneous results.

Quality curriculum is complemented and enhanced by ongoing systematic assessment and evaluation. When Karen and other teachers complained that the phonics program had no assessment, the district told teachers to use sentence dictation as a form of assessment. There was no systematic study by the district of how well the program was doing, aside from the usual battery of standardized tests near the end of the year. Seasoned teachers can guess that long before any longitudinal study of the efficacy of the program is completed, the district will have abandoned the present program in favor of some other one promising increased and longer lasting results. This keeps publishers in business. The lack of quality systematic research on such programs is well documented (Taylor, 1998). There are well-researched examples of phonics instruction that relies upon teachers' knowledge and ongoing decision-making (Moustafa, 1997). In Karen's district, these studies are dismissed as curriculum is reduced to a boxed set of scripts and materials.

Cultural Relevance

Culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994) or culturally responsive teaching means that teaching and curriculum are constructed with, from, and for students. This section is a discussion of cultural relevance in the phonics program.

There is none.

The phonics program does not take into consideration the differences among and between learners' languages and cultures. It does not take into consideration the needs of English language learners whom, in past years in Karen's classroom, benefited from learning through culturally responsive thematic units and inquiry (Freeman & Freeman, 2001). The program ignores or dismisses the complexities of teaching in a diverse society.

Some might argue that for one hour a day children might very well benefit from focusing on the sound system of the English language. As Karen explained at the beginning of this article, she taught that all day before the mandate. She taught phonics in contexts that were meaningful to her students and respectful of their linguistic (including dialect) and cultural diversity. She taught it specific to their needs as she assessed those daily. For an

hour each day, Karen felt forced to ignore the individuality of her students and the specificity of instruction she *could* provide. Her students read less, wrote less, and found their identities less integrated into their classroom. The effects of this remain to be seen.

Hope and Resistance

During the second year of the adoption of the phonics program, Karen made changes. She did lessons quickly by skipping large sections or doing fewer parts within each lesson. She told her principal that she was getting better at delivery (her “personal problems” must have been resolved). This was one way of undermining the attack that the program made upon her students’ learning and her teaching. At no time during the year did Karen sigh that heavy sigh of burned out teachers and ask, “What’s the use?” (Van Manen, 1986). She got angry, sad, and eventually responsive, like many other teachers (Fleischer, 2000).

So, what can we do? The following is a list of possible actions abbreviated from Meyer (2001).

Actions Teachers and Supporters Might Take

- ☞ Do not act alone
- ☞ Getting smarter about things like the reasons for the manufactured crisis in education and getting smarter about the ways in which power is distributed within a district can lead to informed and safe action.
- ☞ Talk to each other; find community and support (that’s what the Michigan for Public Education group did).
- ☞ Study the past: civil rights, union movements, labor organizers, women’s rights, environmental groups
- ☞ Look in the present: People for the American Way, Americans for Religious Liberty, Michigan Public Education Task Force, League of Women Voters, Michigan Education Association, American Association of University Women, and the American Civil Liberties Union
- ☞ WLU and day of WL at NCTE: political action agendas
- ☞ Tell your stories again and again and again and againandagainandagainandagain
- ☞ VOTE: Register, vote, and tell people how you are voting and why

- ☞ Choose: Comply, resist underground, resist above ground, infiltrate and know these are political choices and actions
- ☞ Rethinking Schools has a great website and a cheap price
- ☞ Slow swift adoptions by going public
- ☞ Be a teacher researcher and make your results public
- ☞ Use colleges and universities to act *with* and *for* you...for example:
 - ☞ Work with future teachers as a connection to colleges/universities and to inform teachers-to-be
- ☞ Join and be a voice in: National Council of teachers of English, Whole Language Umbrella, and other organizations that support teachers and go to their conferences
- ☞ International Reading Association has a lobbyist. As a member, you can talk to him.
- ☞ Visit local and state legislative committees; they'll ask who you are
- ☞ Talk to the families that know and love you so that they can be supportive and vocal
Don't let the enemy be us: inaction and closing your door are political statements that isolate you

*This presentation is based largely upon an article entitled Captives of the Script: Killing Us Softly with Phonics to be published in *Language Arts* in July, 2002.

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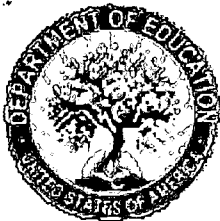
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