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THE POLITICS AND PRACTICE OF LITERACY PEDAGOGY: IDEOLOGY AND OUTCOMES IN TWO RACIALLY DIVERSE SETTINGS

by Margaret Freedson and Wayne Eastman



SKILLS



MEANING



Abstract

Discussing ideologically opposing views of beginning reading, the authors trace the politics of reading curriculum in two racially diverse New Jersey school districts working to raise the literacy achievement of traditionally underserved students through socially just literacy education.

Key words: achievement gap, literacy, reading instruction

In *Agenda for Education in a Democracy*, John Goodlad charges teacher educators with preparing teachers who will provide students with access to knowledge and facilitate the enculturation of young people into the values of a social and political democracy (Goodlad, Mantle-Bromley, & Goodlad, 2004). The preparation of teachers to support wide and equitable access to high-level literacy skills is central to the fulfillment of this mission. Historically, literacy has been a powerful mechanism of social control and a primary vehicle for the empowerment and social mobility of individuals from marginalized groups (Graff, 1987; Perry, 2003). Yet U.S. schools are failing to provide a majority of K–12 students with the reading skills that would allow them to understand, interpret, and critically evaluate texts in ways that are essential, both for accessing knowledge and for full democratic participation. According to the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results, just 36% of Grade 4 students and 34% of Grade 8 students read at or above a “proficient” level, with dramatic race/ethnicity gaps concealed within these aggregated figures (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2015).

In this article we draw on experiences in two school districts that partner with the Montclair State University Network for Educational Renewal to highlight some of the contradictions and challenges of a literacy education that claims an explicit social justice mission. First, we examine the politics of language arts and literacy curriculum in South Orange–Maplewood, New Jersey—one of the country’s most racially integrated metro-area suburban school districts—whose perceived tilt toward whole language prompted a wave of teacher activism in the early to mid-2000s in support of a more structured literacy curriculum. Next, we turn to Newark, in which we focus on the district’s recent

turn, under former Superintendent Cami Anderson, toward Core Knowledge, a highly prescriptive curricular approach.

In the course of telling these stories, it is not our intention to rehash old debates about the merits of phonics, whole language, or balanced literacy, though these will figure in our narrative. Rather, we argue through these experiences that a commitment to advancing democracy and social justice in our schools requires a willingness to critically examine the opportunities we are providing all students—particularly students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and students of color—to acquire minimally acceptable levels of reading proficiency during their early years of schooling. This focus on equitable learning opportunities, in turn, requires that we question the efficacy of our literacy curricula and pedagogies from multiple ideological perspectives.

The Reading Wars

The merits of skills- versus meaning-based approaches to reading instruction have been fiercely debated since the early days of the progressive education movement (Lemann, 1997). Arguments against skills-based literacy instruction took a more radical turn in the 1970s and ’80s amid concerns that through a hidden curriculum, public schools were tending to reproduce rather than disrupt existing social inequalities (Apple, 2004; Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Critical literacy theorist Paulo Freire and his North American successors challenged what they viewed as the authoritarian, transmission-style pedagogies of typical classrooms, arguing that literacy must be approached not merely as “a technical skill to be acquired, but as a necessary foundation for cultural action for freedom” (Giroux, in Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 7). Later sociocultural theories of literacy have suggested that it is impossible to teach



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Reading Wars

component skills such as letter–sound relationships and word recognition as autonomous from the cultural practices and social realities within which language is embedded (Gee, 1996; Street, 1993).

A dualism implicit in the juxtaposition of the hidden curriculum with an education grounded in cultural sensitivity, freedom, and democratic classroom participation was cemented in the whole-language (WL) movement of the 1980s. The meaning-centered WL movement celebrated student voice, cultural relevance, and empowerment, presenting itself as a fundamentally justice-oriented approach to literacy, capable of liberating both students and their teachers from oppressive classroom curricula that fragmented language and stripped it of authenticity (Goodman, 1986; Taylor & Otinsky, 2007). WL teaching, according to its advocates, was the antithesis of code-focused phonics instruction that was identified with dull, compliance-oriented, and irrelevant skill-and-drill (Goodman, 1986). The ideological lines of the reading wars were drawn, with opponents of WL drawing on a large body of empirical evidence showing that for an alphabetic language like English that adheres to fairly regular print-to-speech patterns, the systematic teaching of phonics during the early grades is an essential component of effective instruction (Adams, 1994; Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

In an attempt to take the heavy artillery out of the reading wars, veteran reading researcher Michael Pressley (2002) put forth a call for “balanced” instruction, suggesting that the most effective teachers of beginning reading actually combine explicit instruction in component skills—for example, decoding, fluency, vocabulary—with extensive reading for meaning. But the term *balance* itself became a flashpoint when it was adopted by longtime WL and process-writing advocates to label as *balanced literacy* a workshop approach that tended to minimize the explicit teaching of skills in favor of teacher modeling and student practice. Represented most recently by Lucy Calkins’ *Units of Study for Teaching Reading* program, published by Teachers College, the approach has been widely adopted around the

country, while being denounced by advocates of scientifically based reading instruction as “a fig-leaf that (barely) conceals whole language,” part of a “balanced literacy hoax” that is particularly harmful when used in classrooms full of poor students (Finn, 2014). The reading wars continue.

Teacher Activism

In the early and mid-2000s, the affluent, racially diverse South Orange–Maplewood School District (SOMSD) experienced a wave of teacher activism on behalf of reforming its whole-language-oriented English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum to include more phonics, explicit instruction, and complex content. We interviewed Suzanne Ryan, a central figure in that movement, who at the time was vice president of the South Orange–Maplewood Education Association and a member of the union’s English Language Arts Committee. In 2001, as part of an action-research initiative, the committee distributed a survey on the district’s ELA curriculum to teachers. In 2002, the committee gave a critical presentation to SOMSD Superintendent Peter Horoschak and other administrators, in which teachers criticized the ELA curriculum as not sufficiently structured and explicit on skills—particularly to meet the needs of the district’s lower-socioeconomic status and African American male students who were struggling disproportionately in reading. The administration responded, criticizing the union survey and asserting that the SOMSD was already committed to balanced literacy.

Ryan and other activist teachers spoke with, and in some cases met with, nationally known advocates of phonics and explicit instruction such as Reid Lyon, Louisa Moats, Hollis Scarborough, and Elaine McEwan. McEwan (1998), author of *Angry Parents, Failing Schools*, told the teachers they needed to elect new members to their board of education in order to achieve the reforms they wanted. The teachers aligned with All Children Excelling (ACE), a newly formed parent group. ACE paid \$8,000 for an outside assessment of the SOMSD reading curriculum, which the assessors found wanting as a scientifically based reading program. ACE presented

the assessment to the school board, which did not respond positively.

Ryan described a highly polarized political environment in the early and mid-2000s in South Orange–Maplewood on teaching reading, with opponents of a more structured approach among board members, administrators, teachers, and parents facing off against her team of strong supporters. In particular, she noted the influence and passion of one well-regarded teacher on the other side: “She grew up with nuns and then she moved away from them—she thought we were against students being able to express themselves.”

In 2004, Ryan and other teachers followed McEwan’s advice and joined together to support board candidates committed to more explicit instruction and phonics. Over the next 3 years, the political balance changed on the board, and the new board majority hired a new superintendent, Brian Osborne, who viewed the ELA curriculum as the main issue that had led to his hiring. Osborne oversaw the adoption of the Wilson Foundations program with its strong phonics content to supplement the existing ELA curriculum. In conjunction with the new teacher-supported board majority, he also prioritized closing the achievement gap between South Orange–Maplewood, which at the time had a student body that was about 50% African American, and its peer affluent districts, which were heavily White.

In 2010 and 2011, new board members who did not favor a more structured curriculum were elected, and the district fully adopted the Lucy Calkins reading and writing workshop approach. By the early 2010s, the political ascendancy of Ryan and other teachers advocating a more structured approach to teaching reading had come to an end. In the meantime, though, the advocates of structure had had a substantial period at the helm.

Did teacher advocacy—and the local reading war of which the teachers were a part—make a difference for student learning in South Orange–Maplewood? Analysis of student reading scores on the state test from the beginning to the end of the period in question suggests that it did. South

Orange–Maplewood experienced a major surge in student achievement from 2005 to 2010. In 2005, the district’s third- and fourth-grade reading scores on the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge were very similar to the state average and were much lower than the scores in more heavily White, but socioeconomically comparable, peer districts in the state (Eastman, 2006). In 2010, by contrast, scores in the racially integrated SOMSD were very similar to scores in the peer districts. Further, as detailed on the SOMSD website (SOMSD, 2010), the improvements in the community were greatest among students of color—resulting in a reduction, though not elimination, of the racial achievement gap within the district.

State Intervention

In Newark, unlike South Orange–Maplewood, there has been no major change in student achievement relative to the state average and to peer districts, though the district did achieve modest gains with respect to its peers during the 2005–2010 period in which South Orange–Maplewood surged. Newark performs on a par with other low-income districts and lags far behind the state average.

The story of literacy politics in Newark is one largely of administrative and government intervention rather than teacher and parent activism. Taken over from local control by the state in 1995, Newark Public Schools (NPS) experienced a series of top-down curricular actions intended to address persistently low levels of reading achievement in a district where, as of 2014, 93% of students were of ethnic/racial minority backgrounds and 88% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. The district remains under state control today.

Since the mid-1990s, NPS has promoted various iterations of balanced literacy, interspersed with calls for more scripted, skills-oriented curricula. After decades of reliance on basal readers, Newark had a gradual introduction in the late 1980s of WL elements such as classroom libraries and the use of authentic children’s literature before embracing balanced literacy. The 1995 state takeover brought more investment in classroom reading materials

Reading Wars

and enhanced professional development for teachers on best literacy practices, supported through partnerships with progressive teacher education institutions such as Bank Street, Montclair State University, and the Children's Literacy Initiative. Training on the systematic teaching of phonics figured only minimally in this work.

With the 1998 Abbott decision (Abbott V, 1998), every school was required by the state to adopt one of several Comprehensive School Reform models. Success for All (SFA)—with its scripted teaching of phonics and other reading skills—was the model of choice in many of the district's lowest achieving schools. Use of SFA was deemed a failure and suspended in the mid-2000s; but under the leadership of school reformer Cami Anderson, highly structured literacy curriculum resurfaced in 2013 in the form of the content- and skills-intensive Core Knowledge (CK). Today, CK is the mandated K–2 literacy program in all but five of the districts' elementary schools. Schools not required to use CK—the district's top achievers—use some variation of balanced literacy or a reading/writing workshop approach. Every Newark school is required to use the Common Core-aligned Expeditionary Learning program in Grades 3–8.

We interviewed Eileen Hudek, a reading specialist at Abington School, who before the adoption of CK was in charge of the district's Reading Recovery program, an approach aligned with balanced literacy. She criticized CK in strong terms:

I feel like the district has done a lot of kids dirty with Core Knowledge. I'm not crazy about their phonics instruction, and the "Listening and Learning" strand is organized around content that's not appropriate for elementary kids—for example a unit on Mesopotamia for first-graders!

The real problem Hudek sees in CK, however, is that children spend too little time working with leveled, authentic text. "Perhaps children can do abstract word chaining," she acknowledged, "but they are not really reading."

Samantha Messer, an NPS literacy administrator, views the problem differently. "So many Newark kids in third grade are not reading—their decoding and fluency skills are just not there. Children need direct phonics and fluency instruction." Too many teachers, she says, "don't know this stuff well enough to teach it, and the education schools are not sufficiently preparing teachers with it." CK, with its scripted skills component, offers the opportunity for teachers in a district with a high rate of turnover and a relatively inexperienced work force to teach beginning reading in a way that adheres to principles of sound instruction. For Messer, as for many direct instruction advocates before her, this is the fundamental social justice issue at hand.

The results of the district's commitment to CK are not yet clear. There is reason, though, to be concerned that Newark's most recent turn toward a highly prescriptive approach to literacy instruction may not work well in helping underserved children learn to read better. Newark's top-down, administrative adoption of Core Knowledge—initiated by Anderson, an administrator who was frequently denounced in strong terms by Newark's mayor and school board, and who is no longer in her position—is very different from the teacher-led, voter-endorsed movement to shift South Orange–Maplewood away from a tilt toward whole language to a more genuinely balanced approach. The CK curriculum in the form being implemented in Newark—as opposed to the more open-ended form advocated over the years by E. D. Hirsch (2003)—represents one dug-in side of the reading wars. CK takes a highly structured approach to the teaching of beginning reading skills, albeit with the inclusion of a content knowledge–building strand that is CK's hallmark. Much as we would defend Anderson and other supporters of CK in Newark for being motivated by a social justice vision of literacy equity that is worthy of respect, we question whether a program that seems to restrict discretion in instructional decision-making can gain sufficient buy-in from teachers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Acknowledging that multiple interpretations of the Newark and South Orange–Maplewood experiences are possible, we have come to some conclusions. The competition of moral passions on freedom versus structure activated by the reading wars and the teachers' involvement in local democracy was constructive in South Orange–Maplewood. It led to a better balance in literacy pedagogy than had existed before in the affluent, highly liberal, freedom-oriented community, and also led to students in the community learning how to read better. For Newark, on the other hand, restricting local democracy through state control eliminated a potential avenue to teacher activism and democratic reform that may have enhanced student learning.

Our accounts of literacy pedagogy in the two districts also suggest that in a literacy environment with diverse ideological strands, including a dug-in back-to-basics ideology on the right and a dug-in meaning-and-identity ideology on the left, developing code-switching, ideologically flexible educators who can draw from the best of multiple approaches, without being the prisoner of any of them, is critical. In some districts, such as the whole-language-oriented South Orange–Maplewood of the early 2000s, these ideologically supple educators may, like our interviewee Suzanne Ryan, be the champions of more structured approaches to literacy. In other districts, such as Newark, educators like our interviewee Eileen Hudek may uphold balanced approaches to literacy over administrative pressures for scripted instruction.

The discourse surrounding progressive or critical pedagogies of social justice often sets up socially just literacy practice in unnecessary and, ultimately, counterproductive opposition to the science and psychology of reading. If we are to preserve the vitality and relevance of John Goodlad's agenda, we must move beyond rigid or singular conceptualizations of a social justice literacy pedagogy. Fundamentally, social justice for underserved students must entail success in having students learn to read well in the early grades.

Moves toward more structured approaches that help accomplish this goal—as South Orange–Maplewood did and Newark may yet do—should not be viewed as contrary to social justice. Instead, they should be viewed as a fulfillment of the fundamental imperative to make texts and curriculum more accessible to young students, and, in so doing, support more socially just literacy outcomes. ■

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