



## Integrating Whole Language and Phonics

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The great debate persists on which is better in reading instruction, whole language or phonics. The debate has gone on for decades and one reason that it is still unresolved, perhaps, has to do with it being presented as an either/or situation. Does it have to be dichotomized between whole language versus phonic instruction in a combative role?

### Personalizing Reading Instruction

I have supervised student teachers in public schools for 30 years. Several of my student teachers and regular teachers have stressed personalized teaching of reading in the early primary grades. Personalized reading instruction encourages students provide content for their reading lessons. The content comes from personal experiences of pupils in a group or individually.

For one personalized unit in reading instruction, the student teacher and the regular teacher brought farm toys for an interest center in the classroom. These objects were discussed with the pupils who then provided content which the teachers recorded on a flip chart. Learners were excited to see their own ideas recorded by the teacher. Content presented for one personalized chart had the following ideas:

### *The Farm*

*Tractors pull plows when plowing the fields.  
Later, the tractor pulls a disk to destroy the  
weeds.*

*Wheat is seeded using a grain drill.*

*In summer, the ripe wheat is cut and stored  
in a bin.*

*Some of the wheat is made into flour and  
used for baking bread.*

*Some of the wheat is used in making  
different cereals for breakfast.*

This content came from the students' discussion of the objects with the two teachers working as a team. Pupils read the ideas aloud together as the student and the regular teacher pointed to the phrases. Some students wished to read the entire selection by themselves and several made no errors when reading individually. The whole selection was then read together again by the group. Phonetic analysis of words was not emphasized.

While looking at the recorded selections, one student pointed to three words that had the same beginning letter and sound—"pull," "plows," and "plowing." The student teacher asked them if they could think of additional words that started with that same sound and they mentioned "pan," "panel," and "poet." Another pupil pointed

to "disk" and "drill" that have the same beginning letters and sounds. At this time, the students were making many discoveries, even words that ended with the same letters such as "seeded" and "stored."

Drill and rote learning of phonics are not stressed here nor are pupils tested on the amount of phonics learned. The students determine what they deem fascinating in learning phonic elements while the teacher may ask questions that generate additional, relevant learning. Elementary students need to enjoy the concrete experiences (model farm equipment in this case) as well as abstract ideas such as seeing ideas in writing and reading the related content. Interest in learning increases their group effort in presenting ideas for the chart in a committee setting. Learners seem to like working collaboratively in listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. With writing, pupils saw the student teacher write ideas in neat manuscript letters for the personalized learning activity. Respect for the thinking of each other further enhances cooperative learning endeavors.

A second personalized reading activity involved learners presenting the following ideas after viewing and discussing toy farm animals and related illustrations:

#### *Cows and Milk*

*Cows like to eat grass and give us milk.*

*Their babies are called calves.*

*Machines are used to milk cows.*

*The milk goes from the cow to the bulk milk tank.*

*A truck comes to pick up the milk which leaves the bulk milk tank to a larger tank on the truck.*

*The milk finally ends up at a supermarket.*

After reading the personalized chart "Cows and Milk," learners were asked to

locate words that started with the same letter. One pupil mentioned the words "cows" and "calves." The two teachers, working as a team, then asked which word was mentioned most frequently in writing. The word "milk" was written eight times. Learners then gave additional words that started with the same letter and sound as the word "milk." The following words were given by pupils—"my," "mine," "must," "make," and "money," among others. The word "machine" was noticed in the chart. One student mentioned that "silk" rhymes with "milk." A final question pertaining to the personalized reading chart was, "What other things do you notice about the words here?" One good observation was that the word "grass" and "goes" start and end alike. Pupils were enjoying reading, and even more so were finding it fascinating to make discoveries pertaining to phonics.

Whole language and phonics need not be at opposite ends of the continuum for pupils to like and benefit from. Phonics can be an inherent part of whole language instruction and not stress drill and rote learning. As noticed in this lesson, pupils made interesting discoveries emphasizing sounds and symbols which became an enjoyable game for them to play. Phonics instruction needs to be taught within the framework of meaningful learnings obtained by learners from reading content in personalized reading.

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