



Australian Council of Deans of Education Incorporated

ABN: 5800 386 2359

SUBMISSION TO THE NATIONAL INQUIRY INTO THE TEACHING OF LITERACY

Introduction

The Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) is committed to a balanced view on the teaching of reading and the ways that literacy in general is achieved. This balance encompasses a range of perspectives far wider than the fairly simple juxtaposition found in the terms of reference between phonics and whole language approaches, though some comment on these two approaches is warranted as they appear to represent two of the more common poles of opinion around the issue. ACDE is aware that a raft of research evidence of varying kinds is available which indicates some validity for both approaches, albeit in limited contexts. In that sense, the evidence is contested at best. ACDE would prefer to address the matter by employing some of the more seminal and influential knowledge theories and curriculum theories of recent decades.

Phonics

ACDE agrees that assuring phonetic competency constitutes a baseline skill for ongoing literacy, especially in relation to reading and speaking, and less obviously to thinking and writing. Where phonetic competency is not developing in a fashion that accords with benchmarked expectations, ACDE agrees that intervention is a sound educational strategy to take and that phonics training will normally constitute part of this intervention.

The evidence from the field would indicate that explicit phonics training is likely to be an effective strategy for such a cohort, especially when taken in a clinical setting or with explicit clinical intervention. The evidence of its singular effectiveness in regular classroom settings is far patchier. Some of the reason for this relates to the greater difficulty of isolating one effect from another in the complex environment of the classroom. Some of it may also relate to the fact that phonics training rarely constitutes a specialization in teacher education for general classroom teachers and so classroom-based research in regular settings is less likely to elicit the clarity of evidence to be found in clinical settings.

This fact does not constitute a criticism of teacher competency or teacher education; it simply denotes a reality around the vastness of the complexity and inherent limitations of the role played by average classroom teachers and of the teacher education that prepares them. While specialized learning of the kind implied by phonics training may be in need of some enhancement at pre-service levels of teacher education, it is unrealistic to expect that this will ever constitute for all student teachers the level of specialization required to handle the literacy development needs of all students. At best, such specialization might become a feature of in-service education and even then would only be for a select portion of teachers, granted the many specializations required for comprehensive schooling.

Whole Language

ACDE also sees much merit in the general set of approaches to literacy education that is characterized by the term ‘whole language’. It understands this term to refer to the need for effective education in any area to be related to the learner’s context and to be drawing on and referring constantly to that context. Just as phonetic competency denotes baseline learning, so contextuality represents an essential ingredient if learning is to be relevant, sustained and maximized in its effects.

Some of the more sophisticated epistemologies and curriculum theories of the past few decades have illustrated that context and relevance are vital factors in students reaching those higher forms of learning that include communicative capacity and deep understanding. The eminent curriculum theorist, Lawrence Stenhouse (1975), spoke of the learning functions of ‘initiation’ and ‘induction’. These were forms of learning that reached beyond the instrumental learning that resulted from ‘training’ and ‘instruction’. ‘Initiation’ represented a stage of independence in learning wherein one grasped and understood for oneself the object of learning such that dependence on the teacher and on learning structures was lessened. ‘Induction’ represented a further stage of independent learning where one came to own, value and believe in the object of learning for oneself.

One of the twentieth-century’s most influential knowledge theorists, Jurgen Habermas (1972; 1974), spoke even more explicitly about the need for knowing to go beyond technical learning to what he described as ‘communicative knowledge’ (that is, the knowledge that results from engagement and interrelationship with others) and as ‘self-reflectivity’ (that is, the knowledge of deep understanding, including of self as knower). In many ways, these are the kinds of concepts that underpin the notion of Quality Teaching as conceived by the Carnegie Corporation (1994) from whence much of the contemporary focus on Quality Teaching first emanated.

Application to the Literacy Debate

The ‘debate’ between phonics and whole language may well be analysed using the terms rendered by the thinking of Stenhouse and Habermas. The phonics emphasis is on a technical ‘training and instruction’ set of functions. Its focus is on providing assured foundational knowledge and skills on which higher learning in literacy can build. Stenhouse acknowledged the need for such foundational knowledge and agreed that it needed to be in place before higher learning functions could proceed. According to his thinking, phonetic competency (whether resulting from natural accrual or explicit phonics training) was necessary, albeit not sufficient, for literacy development. It was necessary for achieving the fuller appreciation of language and literacy represented by ‘initiation’ and the fully owned command of language and literacy represented by ‘induction’. Stenhouse would want to assert that the charter of the teacher and the school is incomplete if these higher functions are not reached. One might characterize the notion of ‘whole language’ as an attempt to connote some of those higher functions, though whole language proponents would see the approach also playing a part in laying foundations of understanding.

Habermas was less certain that technical knowing necessarily preceded more sophisticated knowing, but he nevertheless agreed that technical knowing constituted a feature of



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comprehensive knowing. His caution was based on his belief that knowing emanated from cognitive interest and that the nature and shape of cognitive interest differed from individual to individual. Hence, for some, initial knowing about anything might result from the ‘interest’ sparked by the formal processes of technical learning (such as when a teacher engages in explicit training or direct instruction); for others, however, the first spark of interest might result from an ‘interest’ in the less formal processes of inter-relating (such as when a student is attracted to, trusts and wants to emulate a teacher) or from the ‘interest’ that arises from inherent talent, capacity and a natural impulse towards enquiry (which is an independent kind of learning built on ‘inner knowing’).

If Habermas were to address the current debate, he would likely argue that phonetic competency is part of what finally constitutes comprehensive literacy but for many the path to it might be preceded by experiences that, at the time, are more important to the learner. If the cognitive interest at the time is in speaking, reading or even writing prior to developed phonetic awareness, effective teaching practice will respect and encourage this, albeit with an eye on the developing phonetic competency. Poor teaching practice would re-direct student attention away from their individualized cognitive interest towards a fixed and system-determined sequence of learning for all. Habermas’s ‘ways of knowing’ would strike a chord with the experiences of the average early childhood educator and regular classroom teacher.

Research and Literacy

As suggested above, ACDE is aware that a raft of evidence exists which seems to confirm both ends of what amounts to a fairly spurious debate. It agrees that the greater empirical evidence is to be found in the results around phonics training for those experiencing difficulties. On the basis of the knowledge and curriculum theories outlined above, however, it cautions that apart from being largely restricted to clinical settings, such empirical evidence is skewed by its assumptions and its methods towards measuring and eliciting the effects of technical knowing (or ‘training’ and ‘instruction’). In this sense, such research is locked in a world of its own making, where what counts as evidence, how it is to be measured and the estimation of its effects are often determined by a reduced and limited theory of knowing and learning. The result is that what counts as evidence are those things for which evidence is most easily found and, in almost self-determining fashion, easiest to measure and easiest for which to estimate effects. The complexities of knowing and learning, especially in those higher and more enduring forms identified by the likes of Stenhouse and Habermas, are conveniently ignored. Especially when carried by the voices of eminent research scientists, such apparently evidential research, however limited in its scope, has capacity to drown out the voices of classroom teachers whose experiences tell them of its inadequacy but who are relatively powerless to object.

On the other hand, research around the effectiveness of more contextualized and variegated approaches to literacy development is inherently fraught by its inability to produce the kinds of evidence, measures and test results that systems often seek. Investigating and providing some evidence for the products of ‘initiation’ and ‘induction’, or of ‘communicative knowing’ and ‘self-reflectivity’ are of a different qualitative order from the research of laboratory scientists. Such research is necessarily more speculative (or theoretical) and where the empirical is attempted, it will rely more on qualitative rather than quantitative methods. In a word, research around what might broadly be described as ‘whole language’ approaches to



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literacy development is at best a ‘soft science’ with less definitive conclusions and less certainty around proven results. Especially in a competency-based era in search of definitive outcomes for each stage of learning, the soft scientific approach can be at a disadvantage in its appeal, in spite of the fact that its assumptions and beliefs invariably conform more closely to the intuitions and experiences of classroom teachers.

Conclusion

The thinking of Stenhouse and Habermas reminds us that many of the higher functions of learning are beyond what is most easily measured in straightforward empirical terms. It reminds us that learning in its more extended reaches is an extremely complex phenomenon, characterized by a range of individual differences across the student body. Both theories imply if not state the overwhelming importance of the relationship established between teacher and learner, especially in reaching the higher levels of learning. These perspectives on learning have been reaffirmed by a raft of recently conducted research around teacher quality. They are also reminiscent of the cautions of the eminent John Dewey (1964) that an education that focussed too heavily on the instrumental ends of learning would constitute a fatal error if the true purposes of education were to be achieved. For Dewey, these true purposes extended to notions of enhancing independent learning, social discovery and personal growth. While not so easily measured, these goals constitute the substance of education, in terms of literacy and anything else.

ACDE would argue that the teaching of reading and literacy development in general should never be reduced to those instrumental goals and methods that can most easily be captured by outcomes statements and tested by empirical means. This does not mean that there is no place for such goals and methods, especially where students are experiencing difficulty in developing foundational awareness, such as in phonetics. It would be adamant, however, of the following: that such instrumental goals and methods should never be confused with the broader and more complex ends of learning; that the experiences of classroom teachers, especially in early learning sites, tends to lead them naturally to an understanding and appreciation of contextualized and wide-ranging approaches to meeting the varied needs of their students; and, that there is a body of seminal work around theories of knowing and learning that supports these widely-held teacher perceptions.

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