

Phonics Versus Whole Word Reading Instructions

The Dust Storm of Deception

by Ronald D. Davis



The debates and controversies over the proper way to teach children to read would seem to be something new and therefore worthy of our attention. It would appear that someone cares, and maybe something can be done about the situation. The hard line reality is that this assumption is wrong on both counts.

This controversy isn't just an American dilemma; it exists everywhere English is taught in schools. Up until about twenty-five years ago the primary method of teaching reading in English was sounding out words (phonics). I personally experienced phonics training forty-four years ago and it didn't work. It wasn't just me, the system has an inherent flaw and wasn't working very well anywhere; so a solution was needed. As a result we see whole word or whole language recognition replacing the old phonics system.

The illogic of the debates and controversies is centered around the question, "Do we continue using a system that isn't working very well, or do we revert back to a system that also doesn't work very well?" The real question is do the educational authorities really care, and will something actually be done that can remedy the situation? The hard line "probable" answer is "No!!!" Keep in mind that simply changing the system for the sake of changing the system isn't a real answer. Do the educational authorities deserve our respect simply because they appear to be looking for an answer? Is there a real answer? Is there a line of reasoning and logic that can determine a real answer if it exists?

To an "outsider" looking at the entire landscape of education, the answers are fairly clear. It appears that there is a missing puzzle piece. Therefore the debates and controversies are inappropriate because both systems are flawed.

The flaw is that the real purpose of reading isn't taken into consideration by either system. The real and only purpose of reading is to comprehend the communication that has been written. The purpose of the two systems in question is to recognize and convert a written symbol into its proper sound. This is one step beyond that actual starting place.

It would be rude of me to be so critical of the education system, without also offering some reasonable suggestions that could lead to an actual remedy. So I would like to share some of my reasoning on this subject.

Before we can even begin to reason out an answer, there are two things that we must consider:

1. There are two recognized methods of human thought: a.) verbal conceptualization and b.) nonverbal conceptualization. Verbal conceptualization is thinking with mental sounds and nonverbal conceptualization is thinking with mental images. Humans are born with the ability to do nonverbal conceptualization, however, this is not true for verbal conceptualization. Verbal conceptualization is a “developed” skill that cannot be developed until a child has learned the language. Some children are quicker to develop this skill than others. A child that hasn’t developed this skill before entering into the education system cannot learn the phonics skills. Education and reading training are exclusively geared to verbal conceptualization.
2. Language mirrors the thought process. If it didn’t, language would be too difficult for anyone to learn. If we look at language, we see that it is made up of symbols. Symbols are made up of three parts: a.) what the symbol looks like when we see it, b.) what the symbol sounds like when we hear it, and c.) what the symbol means.

If verbal thinking is thinking with sound, then someone capable of doing verbal thinking would be thinking with the sounds of symbols. Making a connection between what a symbol looks like and what they sound like can be easily learned. However, the most important aspect of reading, comprehension, is being ignored. Reading isn’t simply making the proper sound come out of the mouth. The real connection isn’t between what the symbol looks and sounds like, it is making the connection between what the symbol looks like or sounds like and what it means.

If nonverbal thinking is thinking with mental images, it is of no value to know what a symbol sounds like, because the brain simply cannot process the verbal sound data. The person also isn’t thinking with images of what the symbols look like. If this were true the person would have to read his own thinking the same way he would read a newspaper. Therefore, nonverbal conceptualization is actually thinking with the meaning of symbols, in the form of pictures of their concepts and ideas.

To truly teach someone to read all three parts of a symbol must be taught. Chapter 32 “Three Steps to Easier Reading”, in the book *The Gift of Dyslexia* is the instructions on how to teach a picture thinker to read. It’s not just for “dyslexic” children, it is appropriate for anyone that thinks with images – the basic method of thinking we are all born with. This method of reading training looks somewhat like whole word but it truly isn’t. When this reading training is accompanied by the Symbol Mastery Procedures also found in *The Gift of Dyslexia*, the complete connection of what symbols look like, sound like, and mean is made.

This then satisfies the real purpose of reading – comprehension.