

PENDULUM SWING IN READING INSTRUCTION

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Although trends in the history of United States reading instruction have been described as a swinging pendulum, it is not a sufficiently complex metaphor. This paper will explore the pendulum as an apt token of the meaning vs. phonics debate. Coined by Slavin in 1989, the literacy pendulum slices across education's path symbolizing the periodic shifts in philosophical and pedagogical style. More instructional changes have occurred in the last half of the 20th century than in all the time preceding it (Smith, 2002). Just as a pendulum drives a clock, educators know that, given enough time, the opposing form of any trend will tick their way.

The metaphorical cycle begins with an idea touted as the panacea to literacy problems, better by far than the status quo. Teachers and parents crave results; publishers jump to produce materials. Whirlwind adoption and spirited implementation ensue, but often with inadequate evaluation, trials, or instructional training (Robinson, Baker, & Clegg, 1998). Inevitable disillusionment follows, given the oversell needed for investiture (Stahl, 1990). Frustrated teachers abandon the approaches, new ones appear, and the pendulum swings again.

Repeated pendulum cycles with no historical memory have gone on long enough to create an illusion of linear progress (Robinson et al., 1998). It is telling that Nila Banton Smith's definitive history of reading instruction starts with the Santayana quote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (Smith, 2002, p. xii). Newness of an approach does not equal originality, but may mean older ideas redefined by new materials. For example, Science Research Associates successfully awaited the next pendulum swing and reintroduced their phonics product, "DISTAR," as "Reading Mastery" (Robinson et al., 1998).

Historically, reading instruction has vacillated between such polar disputes as: oral vs. silent reading; literature vs. basal texts; or using works from England vs. burning them (Smith, 2002). Debate over whether children read better with a method stressing meaning or stressing phonics is most often associated with the pendulum (Kim, 2008). Ancient Greeks instructed children with the letters and sounds. The pendulum was at the phonics end. Horace Mann in the 19th century advocated the "whole word" approach (swing). At the turn of the century, McGuffey readers swung back to skills and drills. "Dick and Jane" books with repetitive "look-say" sight vocabulary said, "See, Dick, see the swing" (Wren, 2000). In 1955, Rudolf Flesch wrote "Why Johnny Can't Read," which called look-say a method of animal training, and appealed for phonics (Hempenstall, 1997). In the 80's, educators rebelled against contrived phonics work sheets and drills, riding the pendulum back towards meaning in whole language (Ravitch, 2000).

Phonics and whole language were competing notions of the one best way to teach children to read. Phonics is a word analysis skill that breaks words into their constituent parts and sounds. The whole language approach uses the child's natural ability to recognize words in meaningful contexts with all language systems interrelated (Paul & Elder, 2007). The terms stood for much more than reading approaches, however, as the faddish changes went far beyond the classroom, reflecting the political and social climate (Slavin, 1989). Flesch, in the midst of the Cold War, deemed phonics a patriotic pursuit,

and the Russian launch of Sputnik gave new urgency to Flesch's argument (Harp & Brewer, 2005). Social conservatives embraced phonics as a traditionalist, back-to-basics approach, while liberals adopted whole language as more "democratic," calling phonics "elitist" (Wren, 2000). So contentious was this passenger on the pendulum, that its debate earned a nickname: the "Reading Wars" (Pearson, 2004).

Political and social aspects of changes in accepted reading instruction beg for a more complex model than the pendulum. It sways to and fro straight along one path. It would be easy to step out of the way, a model not applicable to the powerful cultural aspects of the paradigm shifts so passionately disputed. The pendulum really only has two positions, forcing a dichotomous oppositional way of viewing the reading issues. When the pendulum shows a whole group to be right, it's hard to believe that so many on the other side could be so wrong. The scale cannot handle a balanced approach, because if a pendulum hangs in the middle, it stops.

Rather than a pendulum, the metaphor for trends in reading instruction over time should be a game of swirling double-dutch jump ropes. Two turners twirl the ropes around and over each other, overlapping them with a rhythmic beat. The two ropes never touch each other, but slice through the same arc. The jumpers in the middle enter and exit between the revolving ropes, but as they skip over each one, they remain hopping essentially in the same place. The ropes rotate over and under them, influencing the way the jumpers play out their movements.

The double-dutch symbol is apt for truer understanding of the whole language vs. phonics issue, for whole language was much more than a methodology, it was a philosophy. It embodied the Rousseauian romantic perspective of natural child development, assuming that children given a language-rich environment have an innate script leading them to literacy (Hempenstall, 1997). Phonics, conversely, valued the conservative Skinnerian pragmatism. These two "ropes" would revolve over and around the child and teacher, joining in a dance of nature and nurture.

In this metaphor, at the center of the image is the child. With him hops and skips the teacher, both dodging the surrounding changes in the methods and philosophies of instruction, but staying essentially the same, teacher and child attempting to find their rhythm. This metaphor can also embody the continual consensus of the Reading Wars. A review of major research on reading shows a broad consensus about effective instruction has slowly evolved over the decades (Kim, 2008). This consensus is not the overused notion of "balanced" approach with phonics and whole language shared equally, the equivalent of the motionless hanging pendulum. The consensus for optimal reading pedagogy is for dynamic and flowing, interacting double lines, a multidisciplinary approach. There is no one right way, or its opposite.

Jeanne Chall's 1967 work, "Learning to Read: The Great Debate," recommended phonics, but only as a beginning method, and predicted with uncanny insight the whole language movement 30 years hence (Ravitch, 2000). In 1975, Chall argued in the National Institute of Education (NIE) report that neither phonics nor look-say approaches were sufficient. There must be balance between them. Another NIE report, the 1985 "Becoming a Nation of Readers," encouraged multidisciplinary studies of reading, shifting the research agenda away from the either/or pendulum model. The 1998 National Reading Council (NRC) editors agreed that the alphabetic principle and the meaning approach should be integrated (Kim, 2008). The 2000 NRP report also endorsed balanced approaches toward the five components of reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (McCardle & Chhabra, 2005).

However, the most important study to the double-dutch metaphor was the "First Grade Studies" report (Bond & Dykstra, 1967). No "best" method exists. Instead, what matters more than the method of

teaching is the teacher, there at the center, hopping in the midst of the swirling ideologies (Flippo, 1999; Harp & Brewer, 2005; Smith, 2002). Well designed materials should be tools for teachers, not a dictation of method (Allington, & McGill-Franzen, 2004).

The double-dutch ropes also help envision whole language as a complex innovation, misunderstood and often inappropriately applied. Contrary to pendulum theory, whole language was *not* universally accepted. Additionally, in some places, implementation was not consistent with the true philosophy (Pearson, 2004). While the ends of the ropes closest to the original turners remain true and taught, the further away the ropes arc out, the more unmanageable they seem. One myth developed that whole language teachers did not teach skills such as phonics. Another myth implied that teachers gave children total freedom and no guidance (Harp & Brewer, 2005). Nor was there a unifying voice of quintessential theory. Scholars and practitioners differed on conventions and strategies within the method (Pearson, 2004). Whole language became the scapegoat when reading scores in California plunged. Even though the state had mandated the literature approach, not whole language, and had large class sizes filled with children who did not speak English, whole language could not overcome the political call back to basics (Harp & Brewer, 2005; Flippo, 1997). The jumpers missed.

One irony of the rise and demise of whole language was that it challenged the wisdom of classroom basals, but its influence still remains. Basal readers had been the icons of accepted instructional methods, and they evolved in the phonics tradition. If the pendulum metaphor was a true one, the swing to whole language and back again would have seen a return to completely phonics-based instruction. The pendulum would not have foreseen that basal readers changed dramatically in the early 90's in response to support within the teaching profession for whole language and literature-based reading and writing. The jumpers just kept jumping within the game (Pearson, 2004).

It was, in fact, the positioning of whole language as a radical swing of the pendulum that assisted its demise. This dénouement cannot be understood simply as a reaction against a particular method or political theory, but rather it must be understood by how it was perceived by media and educators. Critics were able to mount an aggressive campaign against whole language because of the feeling that, inevitably, the pendulum would swing away from the radical side. The dualistic metaphor was too simplistic (Wolf & Poynor, 2001).

Another feature of double-dutch is that more ropes can be added and more players can jump in. Jumpers can switch off and be turners. Turners can jump, too. In the complex Reading Wars atmosphere with swirling powers all around and contentious entrenchment on two opposite sides, the negative publicity in the wake of "Why Johnny Can't Read" damaged the integrity of professional educators. The leaders in the field of reading banded together and in January, 1956, formed the International Reading Association (IRA) to consider progress and future directions (Schantz & Zimmer, 2005).

Why does the dichotomous pendulum model persist? Popular media promotes emotional side-taking and impassioned battles for one right way. Politicians propose that we teach reading the way it was in the "good old days" as a vision of a safer world (Flippo, 1997). One of the most pervasive reasons for the continued educational pendulum is that educators rarely wait for, or demand, hard evidence before adopting new practices on a wide scale (Slavin, 1989). Today, as never before, literacy is seen in utilitarian cultural terms. Politicians, the media, and the public see literacy as related to social problems including poverty and crime (Reutzel, & Mitchell, 2005). The danger in politicizing education, however, is that when one party is found to be wrong, the tendency is to swing to the other party. It perpetuates the pendulum and eliminates the middle ground, which is exactly where practice needs to be (Wolfe, & Poynor, 2001).

The juggling in the middle space is the art and science of teaching. It is human and insightful as well as knowledge-based. Confident decisions about adoption of new programs must come from confident historical memory of past theory and method (Ravitch, 2000).

Mandating programs will never be as effective as good teachers in the classrooms. Research on teacher attitudes during the Reading War years supports the complex double-dutch multiplicity of influences in instruction. A nationwide survey of instructional beliefs and practices of elementary school teachers showed that teachers generally did not adopt simplistic one-sided approaches to whole language or phonics. They provided children with a balanced program involving both reading skills and literary experience immersion (Baumann, Hoffman, Moon, & Duffy-Hester, 1998).

In the future, educators must take charge of their instructional lives. My hope is that they come to value the history of education more and encourage it in teacher training. Preparatory courses in teaching should include the history of reading instruction in order that educators recognize the reconfigured methods and firmly establish their own philosophy of instruction. We cannot understand where we are without knowing where we have been (Ravitch, 2000). Before adopting new reforms and taking a ride on the pendulum, we must examine the past swings in both directions in a historical context, and encourage this authentic take on program choice to curriculum committees that hold the policy-forging power. “Ultimately, teachers must have access to truth and power if they are to create professional norms that nurture effective instruction and support efforts to help children become proficient readers” (Kim, 2008, p. 375). To ameliorate negative perceptions of our profession as faddish, we must know our history and theory well enough to explain to our classroom families and to fellow educators, without fancy jargon, what we are teaching, why, and how.

My prediction for future reading instruction is that educators will become more cognizant of the terminology and programs they are comparing and using because of the greater ease of sharing information. While our teaching predecessors may have functioned within their own district’s policy without issue, educators reared on a more global view of education fostered by the mind-bending possibilities of the Internet will have a different perspective. Technology allows for easy comparison of technique between districts and teachers, and opens a window on pedagogical perspectives, and their results. The ropes would continue to swing, always seeking a working relationship of methods and philosophies, open to new ideas hopping in, but in avoidance of swift adoption of the newest “thing.”

For example, too often the term “balanced” approach is considered the compromise of the meaning vs. phonics debate. It is important to remember that a compromise between these two approaches would not result in a single, best way to teach. If either one had been close to solving all the school literacy issues, there would have been no Reading Wars. Research with new technologies will show what neither battling camp was able to provide, a synthesis of best elements of the various approaches (Wren, 2000).

When there are disagreements, fresh suggestions, such as “adversarial collaboration” will tame the extremes. Too often, attempts to make sense of the Reading Wars focused on review of existing research studies, but the vast body of information makes that a Sisyphus-like task. In addition, scholars tend to emphasize the studies from their own disciplines and philosophies. Studies conducted within prearranged parameters by philosophical adversaries, however, would disseminate a more balanced review and “potentially change the minds of skeptics” (Kim, 2008, p. 374).

As for the children, Smith says, “...history has mercifully demonstrated that, like the protagonist’s survival in the classic tale, “The Pit and the Pendulum,” the children will survive the swath of the pedagogical pendulum,” and they will learn to read (Smith, 2002, p. 417). I know that they will not only survive, but will be at the center of our metaphors, skipping in time to the beat.

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