The Blumenfeld Education Letter

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." HOSEA 4:6

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The purpose of this newsletter is to provide knowledge for parents and educators who want to save the children of America from the destructive forces that endanger them. Our children in the public schools are at grave risk in 4 ways: academically, spiritually, morally, and physically — and only a well-informed public will be able to reduce these risks. "Without vision, the people perish."

Some Houston Schools Dump Whole Language And Return To Phonics
(...And More On The Whole Language Fraud)

Disenchanted with or opposed to whole-language approaches to teaching reading, educators at eight Houston elementary schools have persuaded local school officials to allow them to return to a traditional, phonics-based reading-instruction program this year.

Teachers and principals at the schools argued that their students, many of whom are from low-income families, were doing poorly under the whole-language method, at least in part because the students' parents were not providing the at-home support needed to make the whole-language approach work.

The debate over the kind of reading programs used in the Houston schools mirrors battles taking place nationwide between proponents of phonics, who stress the importance of teaching the relationships between letters and sounds, and whole-language advocates, who believe children should be taught to read using whole texts.

Officials of the Houston school district decided in the mid-1980's to stop permitting schools to use federal Chapter 1 funds to pay for a phonics program known as Direct Instruction Teaching Arithmetic and Reading, or DISTAR. The program, which is heavily structured and paces children through repetition sound drills, was dropped because its results did not meet expectations, according to Suzanne Sutherland, director of the district's language-arts specialists.

Officials Push Whole Language

Over the years, officials explained, schools have been encouraged to replace that kind of an approach with strategies focusing more on early use of literature and writing. Currently, most schools are using a blend of traditional phonics instruction and whole language methodologies and continue to use basal readers.

The changes in reading programs have met with mixed success, however. While scores on standardized reading tests have risen in some schools in recent years, others, such as Douglas Elementary School in one of the city's most impoverished neighborhoods, have experienced a decline.

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"Our kids were suffering," said the school's principal, LaSalle Donnell. "We went to somewhat of a whole-language approach but the teachers were never as gung ho about it as they were about DISTAR."

"There are youngsters somewhere in this country whose mothers and fathers still have time to read to them and are able to help them figure out how to unlock words," said Principal Thaddeus F. Lott Sr. of Wesley Elementary School, who led the fight to reinstate DISTAR funds. "For us, whatever a child learns for the most part happens in school and we have to give them the skills to learn to read without someone standing over their shoulder."

Wesley was the only school in the district that continued to use DISTAR long after funding for the program ended. Students at the school, more than 90 percent of whom are poor and black, score in the top third or quarter of all schools in the district on standardized reading tests, according to district officials. Wesley's success with DISTAR, which is used in conjunction with whole-language strategies, led other principals to take a second look at the program.

School Board Gives In

Responding to the eight schools' concerns, the school board agreed this month to set aside $70,000 in district funds to purchase DISTAR program materials for use on a trial basis over the next two years. In addition, a teacher trained in the program will monitor it at all of the schools involved in the pilot, said Susan Sclafani, the district's assistant superintendent for program planning.

Ms. Sclafani said the change was not an indictment of whole language, but reflects a shift in the district's management philosophy. Under the district's newly appointed superintendent, Frank R. Petruzielo, the district is moving toward a site-based-management approach in which more of the responsibility for curricular programs is placed in the hands of local schools.

The district's 162 other elementary schools plan to continue to use whole language or a combination of approaches, officials said. Fearful of a possible whole-language backlash, however, some schools have advised teachers to avoid those terms, said Principal Steven Amstutz of Mark Twain Elementary School. Mr. Amstutz' school, a language-arts magnet, has been slowly moving towards whole-language approaches for several years. (*Educ. Wk.* 11/20/91)

Comment: It is indeed newsworthy when 8 out of 170 elementary schools in Houston decide to dump whole-language and return to phonics. It's the first big move of this kind to have been reported in the educational press since the whole-language octopus began taking over the elementary schools of America. We hope that it is the beginning of a national trend.

Apparently the whole-language people are now so afraid of a backlash that they are already planning ways to counter it. We can expect whole-language fanatics to do everything in their power to discredit intensive phonics with their usual lies and misrepresentations. Reading instruction will be the bloodiest battleground in education in the years ahead.

New Studies Cast Doubt on Benefits of Whole Language Instruction

Three newly published studies cast doubt on the effectiveness of whole language as a method for teaching reading and sug-

gest that direct instruction in phonics can be effective. The three studies, submitted separately but published together in the Dec. 1991 *Journal of Educational Psychology*, represent the latest salvo in one of the most hotly contested disputes in education.

The reading field is sharply divided between those who advocate teaching reading by emphasizing the relationships between letters and sounds — or phonics — and those in a rapidly emerging camp who advocate the use of whole texts to stress the meaning of words.

One of the new studies — which replicated a landmark 1965 study that has become a foundation of the whole-language movement—concluded that the earlier study had overstated the benefits of reading words in context. In fact, the authors of the new paper found that good readers in their study were not better at identifying words in context than they were at reading them from a list.

Studies Favor Phonics

The two other studies found that direct instruction in letter-sound relationships improved children's ability to identify words. Together, the three studies bolster a strong body of research that points to the need for a balanced approach that includes both phonics instruction and the use of whole texts, according to Frank R. Velluntino, who wrote an introductory paper on the studies for the journal.

"The fact is, the research supports the utility of both code-oriented [phonics] and meaning-oriented strategies," said Mr. Velluntino, a professor of psychology at the State University of New York at Albany and the director of the child-research and study center there. "But in a system based on an alphabet, code-oriented strategies carry a little more weight."

But Kenneth S. Goodman, a professor of education at the University of Arizona, whole language guru and the author of the landmark 1965 study, denied that the new studies refute his analysis. Decades of research — including teachers' observations of their own students — have borne out the validity of teaching reading through the use of whole texts, Mr. Goodman said. "Teachers aren't relying on what I said in 1965," he said. "They are relying on what their kids are doing now."

The so-called "great debate" over reading instruction, which many experts believe has escalated in recent years, has flared up in school-board rooms and legislative chambers, as well as in academic journals. Last fall, for example, school officials in Houston permitted several elementary schools to use a drill-based phonics program after school administrators expressed dissatisfaction over a shift to whole-language methodologies.

Nicholson Challenges Goodman

The three new studies provided the *Journal of Educational Psychology* with a "unique opportunity" to shed additional light on the controversy, said its editor, Joel R. Levin. The first study, conducted by Tom Nicholson, a senior lecturer in the department of education at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand, challenges the findings of one of the "classic" studies in the field.

In that 1965 experiment, Mr. Goodman asked 100 1st through 3rd graders in a Detroit area school to read a list of words, and then asked them to read text materials that included the same words that were on the lists. Examining their errors, or "miscues," Mr. Goodman found that the children made 60 percent to 80 percent fewer errors when reading words in context. The results indicated, Mr. Goodman wrote in a response to

Mr. Nicholson in a separate journal, that "it didn't make sense to introduce words in isolation before asking children to read."

But Mr. Nicholson, in replicating the study, notes that Mr. Goodman failed to distinguish between good and poor readers. The new study found that "the significant gains [from reading words in context] were made only by the poor and average readers and by the 6-year-old good readers. The 7- and 8-year-old good readers did not show significant gains."

"It seems clear that students who have strong phonics skills are better at using context than poor readers, when given the same words to guess, in easier material," Mr. Nicholson writes. "However, with more difficult materials, in which words are harder to guess, phonics skills would become extremely helpful to good readers, and this is probably what enables these readers to read just as well when given words in lists as when given words in context."

Goodman Refutes Nicholson

Mr. Goodman, who has not read the new study, questioned its findings. He noted in an interview that previous attempts to replicate his 1965 experiment by Mr. Nicholson and others had erred by using "minimal contexts," rather than real texts. In addition, he said, a substantial body of research has been conducted in miscue analysis, "and all of them support the same finding mine did."

The two other studies tested another premise at issue in the debate over reading instruction: whether children should be taught letter sounds directly in order to develop their abilities to identify words. One of the studies, conducted by Brian Byrne and Ruth Fielding-Barnsley, psychologists at the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales, Australia, examined two groups of preschoolers. One group was trained directly in identifying "phonemes," or the sounds that make up words; the other group received the training without direct instruction in phoneme identification. The study found that the children who received the direct training were better able to identify phonemes and to recognize words than were members of the control group.

Similarly, the third study, by Barbara R. Foorman and colleagues in the department of psychology and educational psychology at the University of Houston, found that 1st graders who were given greater instruction in letter-sound identification outperformed those who were given less such instruction on a test of word recognition.

Velluntino Advocates Compromise

However, Mr. Velluntino pointed out that both the Byrne-Fielding-Barnsley and Foorman studies also found that many children who had received direct instruction in phoneme identification were unable to recognize many words. These findings suggested, he said, that children must know how sounds are used in reading, as well as how sounds are represented by letters of the alphabet. "Until you can identify words, you do not comprehend," he said. "But if you are not careful, you can make children good decoders, but poor readers."

But Mr. Goodman said such an emphasis on decoding skills reflects an outmoded view of learning. Current cognitive research, he noted, has found that children "construct" reading based on what they already know; they do not read by sounding out each word individually.

"A small group of people," Mr. Goodman said, "thinks that making sense of text depends first on identifying words. They talk to each other," he said. "They are not talking to teachers or to researchers in cogni-

tion." (*Educ. Wk.* 1/8/92)

Comment: Whatever the average American may know about the "great debate," it probably all sounds like the scholastics of old arguing about how many angels can stand on the head of a pin. What is there to debate? Although the new studies are needed to counter the "studies" concocted by the charlatans of whole language, we have 4,000 years of experience in teaching children to read an alphabetic writing system to draw upon. Ken Goodman talks of "current cognitive research" as if those 4,000 years of teaching experience never took place.

Recently, I came across a little book (*The Education of Children at Rome* by George Clarke, Macmillan & Co., 1896) that graphically describes how children were taught to read in ancient Rome about 2,000 years ago — before there were basal readers or picture clues. Dr. Clarke writes:

> In the elementary school (ludus litterarum, ludus litterarius), instruction was confined to reading, writing, and arithmetic. The teacher was called magister ludi, or more specifically, magister ludi litterarum. Unless the school was very large he took entire charge of all the subjects. The general term for the instruction given in the elementary school was litterae. For the methods employed in teaching reading and writing we are dependent chiefly on Quintilian, who treats the subject at considerable length and with his usual good judgment, in the first chapter of his book.
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> In teaching to read the first step was to obtain familiarity with the forms and sounds of the letters. It was a practice in Quintilian's time, of which he did not approve, to teach the names and order of the letters before their forms. The senses of sight and hearing ought to work side by side. The method of learning the names and order first, in Quintilian's opinion, prevents the pupil from recognizing a letter when he sees it, as he does not give attention to its shape, but depends on his memory of the sequence. For this reason, he says, when teachers think the letters have been sufficiently imprinted on the mind in their usual sequence, they reverse the order and pick the letters out promiscuously until the pupil recognizes them from their shape and not from their position. "Moreover," he adds, "I do not disapprove of the familiar practice of seeking to stimulate children to learn by giving them ivory letters to play with, or if anything else can be invented in which they will take more pleasure, and which it will delight them to handle, look at, and call by its name." Tiles, on which alphabets or verses were scratched before baking, were used in the youngest classes. Horace speaks of children being coaxed to learn their letters by tid-bits of pastry....

Comment: Apparently, children were taught to recite the alphabet by heart before they actually saw the letters and could identify them by name. Ancient Rome did not have cereal boxes, milk cartons, newspapers and magazines which children could see all around them. Nevertheless, Quintilian recommended that the children look at the letters as they were learning the alphabet. Today we call that kind of learning "multisensory," sight and sound working together. Mr. Clarke continues:

> The letters having been thoroughly learned, the next step was to master their various combinations into syllables. From Quintilian's remark that the custom of learning the sounds before the forms, which was injurious in the case of letters, was not so in the case of syllables, it would seem that it was usual to give pupils successive combinations such as *ba, be, bi,* etc., *ca, ce, ci,* etc., to spell and repeat until they had memorized them, and then to proceed to more difficult ones. Every possible combination had to be thoroughly mastered (syllabis nullum compendium est, perdiscendae omnes) before the child was permitted to read words. "It is a bad plan, though a common one, to let him postpone the most difficult syllables, so that when he has to write words he will be at a loss. Much trust must not too readily be placed in the first act of memorizing; constant and long-continued repetition will be necessary. In reading there must not be too much haste about connecting syllables into words, or about reading fast, until the pupil can form the combinations of letters in syllables without stumbling or hesitation, or at any rate without having to stop to think about it. Then he may begin to form words from syllables and continuous sentences from words.
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> "It is incredible how much delay is caused in reading by undue haste. It gives rise to hesitation,

interruptions, and repetitions when pupils attempt more than they are equal to, and when, going wrong, they lose confidence even in what they already know. Reading should first of all be sure, then continuous; it must for a long time be slow, until by practice speed and accuracy are acquired."

The same author suggests that at this stage pupils should have their memories trained by learning by heart the sayings of wise men and chosen passages from the poets (the latter being more agreeable to children), by way of amusement. The memory, he says, is almost the only faculty in children of this age (when they are incapable of originating anything) which can be improved by the teacher's care. He recommends as a means for rendering the organs of speech more perfect, that pupils should be required to repeat as rapidly as possible words and verses of intentional difficulty, composed of many syllables harshly combined together. Without such practice as this he thinks that faults of pronunciation will become hardened and incurable. In reading poetry due attention was paid to metre and accent.

The characterisitc feature of the Roman method of teaching to read, as above described, was a painstaking dilligence, and a determination to lay once for all a solid foundation for the educational superstructure. A thorough knowledge of the phonetic value of each letter and of each simple combination of letters was insisted on before reading was attempted; so that the pupil might be able without difficulty to read even words which he had never seen or heard before.

The texts used for reading lessons were generally the works of the poets. "The poets," says Horace, "shape the tender stammering lips of childhood." ... The favourite poets were Livius Andronicus, whose translation of Homer was commonly used as a school text-book, and in later times Vergil and Horace. The works of Terence, Cato the Elder, and the "sentences" of Publilius Syrus were also used, and passages were chosen from them to be learned by heart.

Comment: Obviously, the Romans used intensive, systematic phonics to teach children to read. The method was characterized by "painstaking diligence" in which "a thorough knowledge of the phonetic value of each letter and of each simple combination of letters was insisted on before reading was attempted." This was the method used throughout the Western world to achieve the highest literacy of any civilization in history, and this is the method which is virtually banned in the government schools of the English-speaking world.

The Romans understood that "constant and long-continued repetition" was necessary so that the child would develop an automatic association between letters and sounds and not have "to stop to think about it." The goal was to lay a solid foundation of reading skill on which the educational superstructure could be built. "Reading should first of all be sure, then continuous; it must for a long time be slow, until by practice speed and accuracy are acquired." Our whole-language advocates tell us that "accuracy is not the name of the game." Guessing is. The foundation they provide the children is one of sand.

Hopefully, these new studies will be read and digested by those in charge of reading instruction in American schools. They might be persuaded that whole language is nothing more than an unmitigated fraud.

New Book Explains Whole-Language Philosophy

A new book, *Whole Language: What's the Difference?* (Heinemann, 1991), by whole language advocates Carole Edelsky, Bess Altwerger and Barbara Flores, reveals a great deal of the thinking behind the whole-language movement. What follows are excerpts from the book interspersed with our comments:

You know they're different somehow — those teachers at the group meeting of Teachers Applying Whole Language.... [They] make a reality of the rhetoric about the *profession* of education.... And so, with that firsthand knowledge of the politics of education, they have become *politicized* professionals, working to take control of their own professional lives.... They are whole language educators publicly demonstrating whole language, showing that, in substance, *whole*

language is a unity of framework, theoretical base, and congruent practice. (page 1)

Comment: Why should a teacher of reading be "politicized"? So that he or she will come to the realization that teaching reading is a political act.

Whole language is not only a good idea; it is also a threatening idea for those with a vested interest in the status quo. It threatens because it is *profoundly* different from predominant views about education .... [I]t has the potential not only for affecting learners and teachers in the classroom but for having widespread economic and political ramifications within the huge institution of education .... If whole language is to gain strength (or even simply to remain) as a viable alternative, it has to overcome the backlash and also the well-intentioned confusions. (page 3)

[A]long with prior progressive approaches to education, whole language prefers learner-focused curricula and holds to a conception of the "whole child," of the active learner, of the classroom as a community, and of teachers who learn and learners who teach. For these stances, whole language owes a substantial debt to John Dewey, Caroline Pratt, Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Susan Isaacs, George S. Counts, and other philosopher-artist-educators. (page 7)

Comment: John Dewey was a hard-core socialist. George S. Counts, Dewey's socialist colleague at Teachers College, Columbia University, visited the USSR in its early days and came back with glowing reports about Soviet education. His book, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?*, published in 1932, greatly influenced progressive educators.

A key whole language belief is that reading and writing are learned through really reading and writing.... Drills on isolated skills or language fragments are exercises, so they don't qualify as reading or writing; neither do entire stories exploited for the main purpose of teaching some skill rather than for a purpose appropriate to story. Whole language teachers . . . use genuine texts — children's literature, recipes, song lyrics, dictionaries, and so on. . . . Using song lyrics for the purpose of enjoying or learning the song is congruent with whole language premises. Using the same lyrics to teach rhyming words or spelling patterns is not. (page 8)

Comment: If we applied that same methodology to teaching a child to play the piano or violin, we would insist that the child start playing whole songs before learning the individual notes or practicing the scales! Whole-language theorists have also come up with their own peculiar definition of reading that is bound to baffle a lot of normal human beings:

From a whole language perspective, reading (and language use in general) is a process of generating hypotheses in a meaning-making transaction in a sociohistorical context. As a transactional process (Rosenblatt 1978; Goodman 1984), reading is not a matter of "getting the meaning" from text, as if that meaning were *in* the text waiting to be decoded by the reader. Rather, reading is a matter of readers using the cues print provide and the knowledge they bring with them (of language subsystems, of the world) to construct a unique interpretation. Moreover, that interpretation is situated: readers' *creations* (not retrievals) of meaning with the text vary, depending on their purposes for reading and the expectations of others in the reading event. This view of reading implies that there is no single "correct" meaning for a given text, only plausible meanings. (page 19)

Comment: I doubt that many writers would concur with this whole-language definition of reading! Writers take great pains to convey a particular message. The last thing they want is for the reader to "create" a meaning which is not there.

Learning is a social process . . .Although whole language educators accept the importance of learning through individual interactions with the environment (Piaget 1967), they lean more heavily on Vygotsky's ideas about the social nature of learning (Vygotsky 1978). Whole language takes seriously Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (Engstrom 1986) which entails stressing the importance of collaborations (between students and teachers and between peers) through which students can transcend their own individual limitations. (page 23)

Comment: Who is Vygotsky? According to biographer James V. Wertsch (*Vygotsky and the Social Formation of Mind*, Harvard University Press, 1985), Vygotsky, the Soviet psychologist, "was a staunch advocate of dialectical and historical materialism. He was one of the creators of Marxist psychology." He died in 1934. Wertsch writes: "People such as Vygotsky and his followers devoted every hour of their lives to making certain that the new socialist state, the first grand experiment based on Marxist-Leninist principles, would succeed."

Whole language represents a major shift in thinking about the reading process. Rather than viewing reading as "getting the words," whole language educators view reading as essentially a process of creating meanings. (See the development of this view in the writings of Kenneth Goodman [Gollasch 1982] and Frank Smith [1971, 1986].) Meaning is created through a *transaction* with whole, meaningful texts (i.e., texts of any length that were written with the intent to communicate meaning). It is a transaction, not an extraction of the meaning *from* the print, in the sense that the *reader-created* meanings are a fusion of what the reader brings and what the text offers.

... In a transactional model, words do not have static meanings. Rather, they have meaning *potentials* and the capacity to communicate multiple meanings. (page 32)

Comment: No wonder the kids are confused!

Whole language takes the form it does — putting at its very center a focus on language and an opposition to a "skills" view of written language — because in the current historical context, language has become a major weapon. We cannot understand whole language's refusal to break language down into bits unless we know how breaking it into bits currently functions to track and oppress people. (page 52)

Comment: And so, intensive phonics is a form of social oppression!

The relative emphasis in whole language is more on the side of the learner as a social being, participating in a community of learners during small-group literature study, peer writing workshops, and collaborative projects for studying content. Congruently, in observing children and trying to understand their thinking, a whole language framework tends to rely more on Vygotsky than Piaget, putting more emphasis on the social and historical character of thinking and learning. (page 63)

The whole language theoretical premise underlying which topics are pursued and how they are treated is *all knowledge is socially constructed*. Therefore all knowing is political.... [Teachers] try to demystify social institutions by helping children investigate connections between surface facts and underlying social structures, between lived experience and structural features of class, gender, and race. (page 67)

Comment: Obviously, whole language is not a method of teaching children to read. It is a political program with the goal of turning American children into little socialists. The fact that these whole language "educators" rely so heavily on Vygotsky for their social methodology is a clear indication of their intent. Again, the American people and their obtuse school boards are being duped into believing that whole language is a new and improved method of teaching reading. But at least, in Houston, some people are waking up.

With the desperate literacy problem this nation now has, it certainly is no time for experiments in a field where we know what works. Children get only one chance to be six years old, one chance to be taught to read in the first grade. They ought not to be experimented on. They ought not to be put at risk. Nor should any school board want the children to be experimented on. But if a school board permits this experimentation to take place, then it should be willling to present to the parents the results of the experiment.

Vital Quote

"My education is dismal. I went to a series of schools for mentally retarded teachers."

—Woody Allen