

Read It and Weep

Why does Congress hate the one part of No Child Left Behind that works?

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In a classroom at Ginter Park Elementary School, a century-old brick schoolhouse on a dreary, zoned-commercial truck route that bisects a largely African-American neighborhood in Richmond, a third-grade teacher, Laverne Johnson, is doing something that flies in the face of more than three decades of the most advanced pedagogical principles taught at America's top-rated education schools. Seated on a chair in a corner of her classroom surrounded by a dozen youngsters sitting cross-legged on the floor at her feet, Johnson is teaching reading--as just plain reading. Two and a half hours every morning, systematically going over such basics as phonics, vocabulary words, and a crucial skill known as "phonemic awareness" that entails recognizing the separate sound components of individual words--that the word "happy," for example, contains five letters but only four sounds, or phonemes.

Phonemic awareness is an important prelude to phonics: learning which phonemes are represented in written English by which graphemes, or combinations of letters. According to the principles Johnson is following, it is the mix of phonemic awareness and phonics that enables children (and adults learning how to read for the first time) to sound out, syllable by syllable, unfamiliar-looking words they might encounter on a page and then link those words to meaning. In the world of forward-thinking educational pedagogy, phonemic awareness is deemed useless, phonics of only intermittent value, and the sounding out of words deadening to a child's potential interest in books.

As her main teaching tool, Johnson is using something that also makes the most advanced minds at America's education schools blanch: a reader. Those fat hardback textbooks that were the staple of grade school until the 1970s are out of fashion these days, replaced in most elementary-school classrooms in America by "authentic literature": illustrated trade-press children's books of the sort that parents buy to entertain their offspring at bedtime (or that older youngsters check out of the public library to read for pleasure) and entirely lacking in teachers' guides or clues as to how they might be used as instructional tools.

Again, not so at Ginter Park. Every one of the dozen children sitting at Johnson's feet holds an open copy of the very same textbook that Johnson holds, whose no-nonsense title makes its purpose plain: *Houghton Mifflin Reading, Grade 3*. It comes supplemented with such fashionably disdained materials as vocabulary lists, ready-made comprehension tests, and teachers' guides that include built-in lesson plans and scripts. Indeed, Johnson is handing

out one of those very vocabulary lists: 30 new words that they will encounter in the story to which their books are open but which they haven't started yet: "Poppa's New Pants." Johnson is sounding out the words with the children and going through their meanings: "pattern," "plaid," "draped," "hem."

"What can you tell me about a hem?" she asks. A little girl promptly flips up the hem of her T-shirt and shows it off to the group.

"Sew--S-E-W," says Johnson. "Now, does anyone know a homonym for sew?"

"So--S-O!" shouts another girl.

"Yes!" says Johnson, explaining how it is that two different words with two different meanings can sound the same. A *homonym*--they really still teach such things these days?

The education establishment may sneer at the techniques Johnson uses, but they are part of a small-scale miracle: Ginter Park, despite an unpromising location and a high-poverty-level student body, now ranks in the top third of more than 1,100 public elementary schools in the state of Virginia, holding its own against schools in the ultra-affluent, highly educated suburban counties of northern Virginia just across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. Until only five years ago, Ginter Park, located in a once-upscale trolley-car suburb that has seen better days, was near the bottom of the state's academic barrel, the second-worst-performing elementary school in the Richmond Public Schools district--which was itself the second-worst-performing school district in the state.

Richmond, state capital and onetime capital of the Confederacy, is a classic example of a southern city nearly collapsed in on itself after decades of worsening economic fortunes and out-migration to its exurban ring. The city boasts a handful of genuinely wealthy or artfully gentrified neighborhoods, but there is also much poverty, with its attendant social problems of crime, drugs, teen pregnancy, and single-parent households. Of Richmond's 25,000 youngsters enrolled in public school, 95 percent are African American, and 70 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, a marker of poverty. At Ginter Park Elementary, where all but a tiny handful of students belong to minority groups, the children are on average even poorer, with 83 percent qualifying for the free-lunch program.

During the year 2000, only five public schools in Richmond (and certainly not Ginter Park) were fully accredited by the state of Virginia. Accreditation means that 75 percent of students are proficient at grade level in English, mathematics, science, and history, as measured by a series of tough standardized tests that the state put into place in 1999. This year, thanks in part to a revolution in instructional methods in which the reading program at Ginter Park Elementary played a key role, and thanks in part to a controversial Bush administration grants program called Reading First, a provision of Bush's No Child Left Behind Act that funded the teaching methods on view in Johnson's classroom, 45 of Richmond's 49 public schools enjoy full state accreditation.

Despite Richmond's success story--detailed by education analyst Sol Stern in an article for the Winter 2007 issue of the Manhattan Institute's *City Journal* and duplicated in school

districts across the nation that have availed themselves of Reading First grants--it is safe to say that phonics and its related instructional components are no more popular in the public education establishment than they were five years ago. This despite the fact that the literacy levels of America's schoolchildren range from appallingly low to mediocre by both national and comparative international standards. For example, nearly two-thirds of America's fourth- and eighth-graders failed to attain scores of proficient (again meaning "at grade level") in reading in 2005 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), a nationwide sampling survey of academic achievement. Even worse, some 40 percent of those youngsters could not even read at the "basic" level for their grade: a barebones standard of fluency and comprehension that would mean that as adults they would be able to make sense out of a bus schedule or a simple instruction manual. Poor and minority children fared even worse, with 65 percent of them unable to read even at the basic level for their grade and less than 16 percent reaching the proficiency level.

American young people are also significantly behind their counterparts in other developed and even some developing countries. On the Progress in International Reading Study (PIRLS), a multinational test for fourth-graders administered in 2001, the United States placed only 9th out of 35 participating nations, trailing top-rated Sweden, the Netherlands, and England--despite spending more per student on education than any other nation in the world. On the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test of 15-year-olds in 2003, American students ranked just about in the middle in literacy skills, way behind their coevals in top-ranking Finland and a score of other countries including South Korea, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. It is an educational commonplace that children who cannot read at grade level by the fourth grade are unlikely ever to be able to read well enough to tackle the specialized textbooks they will encounter in science, history, and other subjects as they move to higher grades. More likely, they will fall further and further behind in school, eventually dropping out in many cases.

Despite all this less-than-encouraging data, efforts to teach the elements of reading in a direct and systematic fashion--the way Laverne Johnson does at Ginter Park--are derided at most U.S. education schools as "cutting learning up into itty-bitty pieces," or "one-size-fits-all," or "the factory model," to borrow the words of Yvonne Siu-Runyan, a recently retired education professor at the University of Northern Colorado in an interview for this article. Siu-Runyan is an influential proponent of a competing theory of reading instruction known as "whole language" that is favored by such influential entities as the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association, nearly the entire faculty at the prestigious Columbia Teachers College, and the vast majority of American elementary-school teachers, according to a 2002 poll conducted by the Manhattan Institute.

Siu-Runyan and her counterparts would probably find much to criticize at Ginter Park, where the mandatory two and a half hours of reading instruction vastly exceed the hour or so a day that most elementary schools devote to reading in the primary grades. After two hours of Johnson's direct teaching, her pupils return to their desks, arranged in clumps of four around the classroom, or take seats at one of the four computer workstations lined up at a wall, or just sit on the floor with a book. It's time for a half-hour of "enrichment"--independent reading from books of their choice for the more proficient students--and "intervention"--individual or small-group work under supervision from Johnson on reading components on which less proficient students need extra help. Every child in Ginter Park's

five third-grade classrooms, 72 youngsters in all, is tested weekly, along with the rest of the school's K-4 students, and their number scores are posted on stickies in the first-floor teachers' conference room at the school, so that every teacher is aware of the fluctuating strengths, weaknesses, and progress or lack thereof of every child. Furthermore, every third-grade classroom follows the same daily schedule of instruction in the five components of literacy that reading researchers at Harvard University and elsewhere have identified over the past four decades and that, it would seem, every teacher at Ginter Park can rattle off the tip of his or her tongue: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency (recognizing words and their letter-components quickly and easily, usually tested by having individual students read out loud), vocabulary, and comprehension. All third-graders at Ginter Park read one story a week from *Houghton Mifflin Reading, Grade 3*.

In one third-grade classroom, a teacher helps a boy with phonics, guiding him as he picks out and lines up, from an array of word-flashcards, every word that contains the short "e"-sound: "step," "set," "hotel." In another classroom, a pile of in-class exercises sitting on a teacher's desk have asked the youngsters to look at a drawing of a common object (a couch, for example) and identify the one word out of five multiple-choice items that contains a letter combination that is also in the word pictured (here, the correct answer is "lunch"). A little girl in Johnson's classroom who is clearly an accomplished reader is standing, actually dancing in slow, swaying circles, while she reads aloud to herself the story of Sleeping Beauty, picked out from one of the numerous attractive children's books arranged for the taking on tables or propped up against whiteboards around the room: *Grandfather and I*, *Froggy Gets Dressed*, *All the Places to Live*, *Androcles and the Lion*, *The Life Cycle of a Salmon*. The girl has turned Sleeping Beauty into a private performance for the audience of one that is her own imagination: reading the dialogue in different voices for the different characters, following the words on the page with her finger, sashaying in place, so engrossed and so captivating that another advanced reader, inspired, joins in with her own book, R.L. Stine's *Mostly Ghostly*, and her own swaying dance.

Johnson's classroom, like the other third-grade classrooms at Ginter Park, is stuffed with a tidy jumble of visual and written material pitched at 8-year-olds: a world globe, a portrait of George Washington, and on every wall, posters illustrating simple machines, grasslands animals, and the water cycle from rainfall to faucet, a set of multiplication tables, a cursive alphabet with arrow-directions on how to form the letters, "The Gifts of the Ancient Greeks," "The Gifts of the Romans," a list of values ("compassion," "perseverance," "responsibility"). There are certificates of "Math Whiz Achievement" for students who have worked their way successfully through 100 addition problems (Ginter Park teaches arithmetic the old-fashioned way, just as it teaches reading the old-fashioned way). And lest one think that *Poppa's New Pants*, this week's story, is dull see-Spot-run fare reminiscent of the 1950s, it is actually as "authentic" a piece of children's literature as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Its author, Angela Shelf Medearis of Austin, Texas, is a widely read writer of dozens of children's books about African-American life (indeed, *Poppa's New Pants* can be bought on Amazon.com as a freestanding title). Colorful, highly detailed pictures by the award-winning illustrator John Ward help tell Medearis's warm and humorous story about a black farm family and its eccentric members in the Depression-era South. Elsewhere in *Houghton Mifflin Reading, Grade 3*, are lushly illustrated, information-packed chapters about Plymouth Plantation, Ernest Shackleton's expedition to Antarctica in 1914-1916, and Bessie Coleman, America's first black licensed pilot. The

material is not only interesting in itself, but it introduces young readers to worlds and vocabularies that extend well beyond their own neighborhoods.

Being on the premises of Ginter Park Elementary--with its high-ceilinged, tall-windowed classrooms, its wide, spotless hallways whose walls are decorated with samples of student art, its well-stocked library (called the "media center" because it also features computers and DVD players), its attentive and energetic teachers, its lively but well-mannered youngsters in grades ranging from pre-K to fifth, and its ultratraditional curriculum, is like passing through a time warp to the world of, say, your grandmother's public school--except better, because the classes at Ginter Park are smaller and the instructional materials are livelier, richer, more comprehensive, and fortified by up-to-date technology.

The miracle at Ginter Park is partly, perhaps hugely, due to an aggressive new school superintendent, Deborah Jewell-Sherman. In 2001, the year before her promotion to the top post, while she was still director of instruction in Richmond, Jewell-Sherman had already incorporated a set of instructional materials called Voyager Universal Literacy, heavy on phonics and phonemic awareness, into the lowest-performing of Richmond's elementary schools, including Ginter Park. Then, when she took over the city's education system in 2002, one of her first steps was to standardize the reading curriculum, mandating Voyager and the Houghton Mifflin readers for all Richmond elementary schools, and then to start training teachers on how to use them. Before that, every teacher had been free to pick his or her own reading materials and design his or her own curriculum. This led to widespread "hobby teaching," as one Richmond teacher called it: Instructors left to their own devices would sometimes spend the entire school year working with their students on art and other projects that suited the teacher's interests and skipping tests and other written assignments that could be assessed, with the upshot being that the teachers often "never got around to teaching anything." The results from Jewell-Sherman's plan of attack were immediate. By 2003, 22 schools in Richmond had achieved full state accreditation.

The real boost to Ginter Park, and to the Richmond school system in general, however, also came in 2002, when Jewell-Sherman arranged for the Richmond public schools to accept a modest grant of about \$450,000 a year, made available through the state of Virginia, from the Reading First program, which hands out about \$1 billion a year nationwide for use in kindergarten and the first three grades at schools in high-poverty districts so that the schools can set up programs deriving from "scientifically based" reading research. The programs must also incorporate the five-part approach to teaching reading--"essential components of reading instruction (ECRI)" in the language of the statute--that the Ginter Park teachers know so well. Richmond's grant funded a pilot program at Ginter Park and another bottom-of-the-barrel elementary school in Richmond that paid for the hiring of a full-time reading consultant at each school, comprehensive instructional materials, a system of regular reading assessments so that youngsters could be given extra help either individually or in small groups, and more teacher training. Within a couple of years, the state of Virginia raised Ginter Park's classification from "low-proficiency" to "high-proficiency," and in 2005, the U.S. Education Department recognized Ginter Park as "distinguished" among elementary schools receiving Title I antipoverty funds. The two Reading First schools have become models for other Richmond schools, as teachers reached out to train other teachers in the program's methodology.

Reading First has recently been the subject of a major government scandal of sorts (for the few who know or care about it outside the Washington Beltway and the world of education insiders). Last September the Education Department's inspector general, John C. Higgins Jr., issued an audit report concluding that Reading First's administrator, Christopher Doherty, had stacked the panels that reviewed states' applications for Reading First grants with experts who steered the states toward using certain reading instructional materials favored by Doherty at the expense of others, and that some of those experts, typically college professors with backgrounds in reading science, had either personally developed the approved materials or acted as paid consultants to the companies that developed them. Although Higgins's report made no finding of corruption or conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise (the report referred only to "potential" conflicts and the "appearance" of conflict), and there was no evidence that anyone connected to the Reading First program had improperly mandated or recommended any specific materials by name (the language of the No Child Left Behind Act forbids this, in fact), Doherty, whose wife had been a part-time consultant to one approved program, Direct Instruction, was forced to resign under threat of being fired.

One of the first actions of the new Democratic Congress sworn in this year was a four-hour hearing in April before the House Committee on Education and Labor devoted to rehashing Higgins's report. Higgins disclosed that he had referred *l'affaire* Reading First to the Justice Department for possible prosecution, and Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., chairman of the House Education Committee, stated that, in his opinion, Doherty had turned Reading First into a "criminal enterprise." Lately, however, little has been heard from Justice or any other federal entity about Reading First, although Congress is expected to vote on whether and how to reauthorize the No Child Left Behind law sometime this year, with much pressure from the education establishment to change its provisions drastically. (The law, which disperses up to \$20 billion in federal funds to school districts annually, is highly unpopular with most teachers because it conditions receipt of funds on student progress on state-administered standardized tests.)

One reason many critics of Reading First have grown silent of late is that what Rep. Miller deems a criminal enterprise is possibly the most successful federal education program in history. According to an April 19 report from the Education Department, 97 percent of the school districts participating in Reading First reported gains from 2004 to 2006 of 16 percentage points for first-graders and 15 percentage points for third-graders in meeting fluency goals. Comparable gains were reported in reading comprehension: 15 percentage points on average for first-graders and 12 percentage points on average for third-graders. The progress was across the board: for African Americans, Hispanics, English-language learners, disabled students, and the economically disadvantaged, as well as for the white middle class. These results have confounded both the education-school types who hate the idea of intensive phonics, vocabulary drilling, and standardized testing, and also the many small-government conservatives who believe that the entire No Child Left Behind Act represents unprecedented federal intrusion into education, which has traditionally been strictly a state and local concern.

Furthermore, and ironically, the instructional materials from Houghton Mifflin and Voyager that Doherty's panels deemed acceptable in order to qualify states for Reading First grants--and which Higgins testified at the House hearing had generated an

"unprecedented" number of complaints for having been produced by "commercial interests"--are the very materials that Richmond educators credit with turning Ginter Park into a model school. The materials marketed by Houghton Mifflin and Voyager might strike an education professor as overly "commercial," but according to the teachers at Ginter Park, they do the job. "We selected a program that fit our needs," said Lynn Smith, Ginter Park's reading coach, concerning the Voyager materials. "It provided for small, flexible groups so that with the changing data, we could respond to children's needs in an individualized way, it encouraged deep thinking by the children, and it included strong phonics. It also contains extra support for the strong students. It's just a real nice fit."

Reading First and the change in Richmond's pedagogical culture over the past five years have had a galvanizing effect on the morale of Richmond teachers. "We could see immediate results," said Cathy S. Randolph, Ginter Park's principal. "It's exciting to be successful."

In his *City Journal* article about Reading First, Sol Stern crunched the numbers and discovered that in 2005 Richmond's third-graders had outperformed, by 15 percentage points on the state reading test, the black third-graders in the public schools of affluent Fairfax County in Northern Virginia, which had turned down federal Reading First money on the theory that the program's restrictions would interfere with Fairfax teachers' classroom creativity. Only 59 percent of the African-American children in Fairfax were reading at grade level in 2005, compared with 74 percent of their counterparts in Richmond. The Richmond percentage barely lagged the 79 percent grade-level ratio for Fairfax's affluent white youngsters.

That Reading First has proved to be a runaway success ought to be a no-brainer. Phonics in a manner of speaking *is* reading: the almost instantaneous process by which the human brain links the troika of spoken sounds, those symbols on the printed page that we call writing, and meaning. The pivotal moment in the movie *The Miracle Worker* in which the blind and deaf Helen Keller suddenly makes the connection for the first time between the world outside her and the letters that her teacher has traced on her arm, is a paradigmatic dramatization of the power of the written word as a code of communication. It would seem obvious that children learning how to read for the first time might benefit from a thorough and systematic grounding in phonics and phonemic awareness. The English language contains a larger number of sounds than many other languages, thanks to English's heavy infusion of French after the Norman Conquest and centuries of changing pronunciation. While English spelling is less arbitrary than most people think, the 26 letters of the English alphabet often have to do double, triple, and quadruple duty in order to accommodate the large number of English sounds. This can be highly confusing to a beginning reader who cannot understand why the word "was," for example, might look like "wass" on the page but is pronounced "wuz"--a pronunciation that is actually logical and regular if you know something about phonics.

It would seem obvious, too, that learning how to read involves real *learning*--receiving and internalizing step-by-step instructions on how to decode the symbols on the page, fit them to spoken sounds, and then link those sounds to meaning. Hence vocabulary lists and the old-fashioned technique of having novice readers "sound out" words by reading aloud in class in order to associate sounds and letters. Children also need to learn how to make all

those connections quickly and almost unconsciously, or reading will always be difficult and unpleasant for them, which is why fluency and comprehension are key measures of reading skill. Learning how to read would seem analogous to learning how to play the piano, in which practicing scales, mastering fingering technique, decoding the notes, and developing a feeling for the rhythm and beauty of the music are simultaneous but separate components of the process.

All this common-sense intuition--much of which underlay the famous phonics-intensive McGuffey Readers of the 19th century--is in fact supported by decades of 20th-century scientific research into how people actually learn how to read, starting with the work of Jeanne Sternlicht Chall, a psychologist with a special interest in fostering the literacy skills of poor children who founded the Harvard Reading Laboratory at Harvard's graduate school of education in 1966. Starting in the 1970s, a flood of reading studies--an estimated 10,000 in all--applied quantitative analysis and experimental, control-group-based research to identify the instruction strategies that teach reading most efficiently. The researchers included not only specialists in education and early childhood development but also experts in such fields as linguistics, psychology, neurology, genetics, anthropology, and sociology.

The resolutely apolitical NICHD, part of the National Institutes of Health, has been funding studies of reading development since 1964, and has sponsored longitudinal studies of 44,000 children in more than 1,000 schools since the early 1980s, tracking some of those children and their reading progress for more than 20 years as they grew to adulthood. It was all that research which led the NICHD to identify the five components that appear in Reading First's enabling legislation (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). The value of these studies, their proponents argue, is that like all scientific studies, they are based on rigorous methodologies--assessments, for example, not only of how well children can read using various instruction strategies, but even how they move their eyes as they scan a printed page. And, like all valid scientific findings, the results can be replicated.

"We know how reading is acquired," says Louisa Cook Moats, a protégée of Jeanne Chall's at Harvard and director of the NICHD's Early Reading Interventions project from 1997 to 2001. "It's learning to process very specific kinds of linguistic information and build networks that coordinate phonological processing to the patterns of printed symbols that the eye sees, and it's also connected to meaning and the building of vocabulary. When I explain how the process works to teachers, I compare it to an unraveled rope with the strands sticking out. The strands are all those beginning skills to be woven together in the rope." Reading looks automatic and natural, Moats explains, but only because skilled readers are practiced enough to decode the symbols at lightning speed.

There are many causes for the resistance of the education establishment not only to the conclusions that Moats and others have drawn about reading instruction but to the research that underlies those conclusions. One bedrock philosophical principle, however, unites all those who oppose the step-by-step teaching of literacy skills: the notion that learning how to read is not at all like learning how to play the piano. Instead, the proponents of "whole language" instruction contend, it is a natural process akin to learning how to speak--something that children don't have to be taught formally but pick up automatically if exposed to a sufficiently print-rich environment. Stephen D. Krashen, a professor emeritus

of education at the University of Southern California and self-described "staunch defender" of whole-language strategies, explained in an email: "[A]ny child exposed to comprehensible print will learn to read, barring severe neurological or emotional problems." Or, as Krashen amplified in a telephone interview: "Kids learn to read by reading."

Hence the antipathy of the whole-language proponents to having children read a story out of a reader such as Houghton Mifflin's; that doesn't count as "real reading," to borrow a phrase from Krashen's email. Indeed, textbooks or any other kind of formal instructional material are eschewed. In elementary-school classrooms across the country, reading instruction typically consists of what is called "shared reading." The teacher reads a story aloud to the class, often from a "Big Book," an oversized, large-type edition of an illustrated children's book of the teacher's choosing that is propped up on a table or on the floor in front of the class. The teacher might read the story out loud several times, pointing out words that may be difficult, and then have the class read the story aloud in unison while the teacher turns the pages. There is almost no individual reading aloud, and the sounding out of words phonetically is actively discouraged as tending to turn youngsters into rote parsers of syllables who fail to understand what they are reading.

As for phonics *per se*, both Krashen and Yvonne Siu-Runyan insist that they indeed incorporate phonics instruction into their reading strategies, but only in elementary fashion and on an as-needed basis--"basic phonics," as Krashen puts it. Whole-language instruction also typically includes periods of independent silent reading--"Drop Everything and Read" is the name for these impromptu sessions--in which the children pick out and peruse material of their choice from a classroom library of "leveled books"--that is, books that the teacher deems appropriate for their reading level. During these sessions the teacher typically "models" the process by dropping everything and reading silently from a children's book, too, on the principle that seeing other people read encourages reading. As for vocabulary, whole-language classrooms typically incorporate a "word wall"--an ever-changing collection of large-letter words written on posters that the children chant together cheerleader-style and then write out.

The instructional principles behind whole language--light on formal content and heavy on assumptions that children will learn to read by feeling enthusiastic about reading--are far from new. Indeed, they date back to the end of the 19th century, to the educational theories of John Dewey (1859-1952), the pragmatist philosopher and educational theorist who held that children learn best not by directly absorbing instruction from their teachers in specific subjects such as mathematics or history, but by interacting with the real world. School, in Dewey's thinking, should offer a simulacrum of real-world experience in which learning takes place obliquely as the child explores his or her surroundings under the guidance of a teacher. Dewey was in turn influenced by the romantic philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed that children were naturally perfect and that education ought to consist of allowing them maximum freedom to develop their innate talents.

In 1904 Dewey joined the faculty of Columbia Teachers College, regarded then as now as America's premier education school (*U.S. News* currently gives Columbia Teachers its No. 1 rating). From there Dewey's "progressive" theories of pedagogy profoundly influenced several generations of American teachers and school boards, right up until the Sputnik

launch of 1957, when it suddenly looked as though the Soviet Union, whose Communist leaders had kept in place a decidedly non-progressive education system dating from czarist days, had the United States over a barrel in science and technology. The Dick and Jane readers widely used in American elementary schools from the 1930s through the 1950s were offshoots of a branch of Dewey-ism that held that phonics instruction was backward and proposed that the way to make children literate was to expose them to simple words repeated interminably. ("See Dick. See Dick run. See Dick run fast.") This so-called "look-say" pedagogy (a forerunner to whole language in its emphasis on context and meaning rather than sounds and letters) met its end after Rudolf Flesch published his bestselling *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955, two years before Sputnik. By the early 1960s it looked as though progressive education had run its course in all but the most *outré* private schools. Jeanne Chall's 1967 book *Learning to Read: The Great Debate*, proposed a return to thorough grounding in phonics, but in up-to-date combination with interesting children's literature.

Then came a revolution in pedagogy that swept through the K-12 grades in the 1970s and 1980s as thoroughly as its college-level sister, postmodernism, swept through the academy. The revolution was called "constructivism." Like postmodernism, it had its grounding in arcane Francophone theory: the ideas of the Swiss cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget. Piaget proposed that children progress through distinct developmental stages during which they acquire knowledge not simply by learning it from the outside but by "constructing" it from within, building upon and reflecting upon what they already know in order to rise to new levels of knowing. In Piaget's theoretical dialectic, the subjective process of learning was more important than any particular content learned. Indeed, Piaget argued, it was crucial that the developmental process taking place within each individual child's mind not be interfered with, but rather nurtured and encouraged by the child's teachers. As the ubiquitous mantra of Piaget-influenced educational theory later put it, the teacher should be "a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage." The essential constructivist principle is that teachers should teach nothing directly, but rather function as coaches while their students basically teach themselves.

This was Dewey's progressivism with a new, fashionably Continental face. "The idea is that education is growth, education is development, and that children grow all by themselves," said Diane Ravitch, an education policy analyst and author of *Left Back: A Century of Battles over School Reform*, a mordant critique of constructivism. "The idea is that children figure everything out for themselves," Ravitch added. "There's no authority."

Piaget acquired an army of American apostles at education schools and elsewhere. Chief among them were Frank Smith, an Australian journalist-turned university instructor, and Kenneth Goodman, an education professor at the University of Arizona. Smith, whose 1971 book *Understanding Reading* derided the teaching of phonics, and Goodman are credited as the creators of whole-language theory. In a 1967 article in an education journal, Goodman had described the process of learning to read as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" in which children decipher words on a page, not by decoding them phonetically as Chall maintained, but by following "cues." The cues, Goodman maintained, can be the individual letters and sounds in the word--or they can be the larger context of the story in which the word appears, the artist's illustrations, or even (and perhaps especially) the child's own previously acquired knowledge. Like Smith, Goodman argued that phonics instruction was

useless at best, downright harmful at worst. "Matching letters with sounds is a flat-earth view of the world," he declared in a 1986 book, *What's Whole in Whole Language*. Dramatically turning centuries-old principles of reading instruction on their heads, Goodman maintained that "a story is easier to read than a page, a page easier to read than a paragraph, a paragraph easier than a sentence, a sentence easier than a word, and a word easier than a letter."

Both Smith, who had never taught reading in an elementary-school classroom, and Goodman, who had, derided the use of textbooks, worksheets, and other formal instructional material. Smith's 1986 book, *Insult to Intelligence: The Bureaucratic Invasion of Our Classrooms*, complained about children being forced by their elders to memorize mountains of useless data. (Memorization is generally considered in constructivist theory to be developmentally inappropriate for elementary school.) In whole-language theory, the teacher's job is to identify the child's errors--or "miscues," as they are called--and nudge the child in the direction of the correct cues. "Drill and Kill" is their derisive term for pedagogy that emphasizes the systematic teaching of content.

Thus began the practice, now a bedrock of whole-language pedagogy, of teachers' encouraging beginning readers to look at the first letter of any difficult word they encounter in a story and guess the rest, or if that strategy fails to produce results, simply to skip the word and return to it later. Although Goodman refused to be interviewed for this article, stating in a pair of dyspeptic emails that he would not respond to "negative" criticism of his theories, Yvonne Siu-Runyan provided an example of how a whole-language reading lesson works in practice. "A child encounters the word 'butterflies' in a story," said Siu-Runyan. "The first time he reads it as 'b-flies.' Maybe the next time he reads it as 'butt-flies' and the next time as 'betterflies.' For me to assume he's not going to get it would be a mistake, because finally he'll say to himself, 'Does this make sense?' He'll look at the pictures of butterflies [in the book] and say to himself, 'Oh, this is a story about butterflies!' And he'll get it right after that. It's a lot more complicated a process than handing a child a list of words."

Whole language and other aspects of constructivist theory swept through the education schools, starting with the flagship Columbia Teachers College, where Dewey's progressive influence had never waned, where courses on reading pedagogy to this day concentrate on erecting a "theoretical framework" for instruction rather than teaching teachers what actually works in classrooms, and where the school's publishing affiliate, Teachers College Press, churns out dozens of constructivist treatises every year. Smith and Goodman crisscrossed the country on the ed-school lecture circuit, where they were welcomed with open arms and standing ovations by professors and students alike. Whole language clearly appealed because it allowed teachers to do essentially what they liked in their reading classes, and it relieved them of the arduous work of ensuring that their students had mastered specific literacy skills. Teachers and administrators rushed to create "child-centered" and "learner-centered" curricula in every field and at every grade level ("learner" being the fashionable ed-speak word these days for "student," as it connotes the constructivist idea that children take charge of their own education).

Sandra Wilde, an education professor at Portland State University in Oregon, deemed that learning how to spell, like learning how to read, "should ultimately be as natural,

unconscious, effortless, and pleasant as learning to speak," so spellers went the way of readers in classrooms across the country. Teachers encouraged youngsters to make up their own "invented" or "independent" spelling, also under the influence of Wilde's self-described "holistic" approach, which theorized that children could learn from their spelling "miscues." Wilde drafted a "Speller's Bill of Rights" that included "the right to be valued as a human being regardless of your spelling." Whole-language advocates and other constructivists also abandoned conventional tests and letter grades, which they thought slighted youngsters' individuality, in favor of what they called "authentic assessment." That usually means having students assemble samples of their work in a "portfolio" (the oversized envelope that artists take to job interviews) that the teacher then evaluates verbally.

Systematic lessons in grammar, handwriting, and punctuation also went by the boards, thought to be developmentally inappropriate for young children. The teaching of writing completely changed focus. Teachers in the primary grades had traditionally taught their students first how to construct grammatical and properly punctuated sentences, then how to form paragraphs, and finally how to build paragraphs into simple essays and stories. All this was abandoned in favor of a kind of writers' workshop approach that focused on students' self-expression and personal reactions. "Journaling," which allows youngsters to choose their own topics to write about, became a favored classroom writing activity, even for kindergartners and first-graders. Students were encouraged not to worry about grammatical and spelling errors, as these could be cleaned up in an "editing" process with the teacher. Imitating the graduate writing program at the University of Iowa and the copy-desk procedures at the *New Yorker* was supposed to turn 6-year-olds into sophisticated writers, critics, and thinkers.

Two education professors at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Donald A. McAndrew and C. Mark Hurlbert, in an award-winning 1993 article in the journal of the National Council of Teachers of English, went so far as to urge students to indulge in "intentional errors" of syntax and usage as a way of rebelling against the "tyranny" of standard English usage. In 2003 the National Council took its own insurrectionist stand against standard English, voting to endorse a manifesto titled "Students' Right to Their Own Language"--namely the right to write their homework in hip-hop-ese, Spanglish, Valley Girl talk, or whatever other nonstandard dialect they believe best expresses their "community" or "personal" identities. Many whole-language teachers do not bother to prepare lesson plans or syllabi, relying instead on querying their students on what they would like to learn on any particular day.

Like their opposite numbers in the reading science community, whole language advocates can point to plenty of published research, fattening the education journals and bolstering what the whole-language proponents insist is their superior approach to teaching literacy. That research, however, almost uniformly consists of anecdotal recollections by its authors of eureka! moments in their classrooms. The story that Siu-Runyan narrated about the child who finally deciphered the word "butterflies" is a perfect example. The education-school slang term for such "qualitative" (in contrast to quantitative) observations, analogous to the material that anthropologists record in their field notebooks, is "kidwatching." Almost all kidwatching research consists of teachers' first-person success stories--because whole-language advocates are human and they almost never report their classroom failures. "But

they're sure that those reports [in the education journals] are 100 percent scientific," says Patrick Goff, a professor emeritus of education at San Diego State University in California and reading science advocate. "That's because you can get a Ph.D. in education without ever having to read a single quantitative study. Even my own university would not teach its students about the empirical evidence concerning the teaching of reading."

Fortunately, perhaps, for about 40 to 50 percent of children--the socioeconomic top 40 to 50 percent hailing from upper-middle-class-to-wealthy "print-rich" homes where the reading of books, magazines, and newspapers is an everyday occurrence--whole-language reading pedagogy does little if any harm. The most verbal of these youngsters, the gifted offspring of lawyers, college professors, and Hollywood screenwriters, either already know how to read by the time they get to kindergarten or pick up reading quickly no matter how they are taught. Others who are not so naturally verbal struggle with whole language's guessing games and unsystematic instruction but eventually manage to read at grade level and to write and spell passably. Furthermore, many whole-language proponents, such as Siu-Runyan and Krashen, are clearly patient, gifted, imaginative teachers sensitive to their students as individuals (Siu-Runyan says she slips structure into her student-interest-driven lesson plans, and Krashen, who currently teaches in a suburb of Portland, Oregon, where whole language is officially *verboten*, runs his classes as a kind of Dead Poets Society, ignoring the ban while the administration looks the other way).

Indeed, even the staunchest supporters of the five-component scientific approach to literacy acknowledge that whole language's emphasis on child-friendly classrooms and high-quality children's literature are valuable contributions to pedagogy. Those desks arranged in clusters, not rows, the children sitting on the floor, and the plethora of stimulating books in Laverne Johnson's classroom at Ginter Park represent some of the best of whole language's legacy. Finally, many affluent parents with progressive political leanings actually prefer the unstructured, arts-and-crafts-oriented methodology of constructivism, which is why private progressive elementary schools such as the Dalton School in Manhattan and the Peninsula School near San Francisco continue to flourish (by the time those children enter high school, though, SAT cram courses and the rat race for Ivy League admissions are the order of the day; few of America's top private prep schools operate on progressive pedagogical principles).

The children who suffer from the whole-language revolution are that bottom 40 percent of American children, the poor and near-poor who come from households where books are seldom seen and where unschooled parents have starved their offspring of the rich vocabulary and cultural exposure to which better-off children are accustomed as a matter of course. Children whose parents don't speak English at home fare worst of all in whole language. This group of low-income, print-deprived children is the group that needs direct reading instruction most desperately, and as the results in Richmond indicate, benefits from it most dramatically.

Long before Reading First became law in 2002, there had been a backlash against whole language by parents and school superintendents unimpressed by their students' low test scores despite being assured that their children were being taught according to the most up-

to-date ideas. In 1987 the state of California mandated a whole-language approach to reading and writing. Within a few years California's reading scores on the NAEP test plummeted to third-lowest in the United States *and* its overseas territories; only Louisiana and Guam ranked lower. The decline stretched across the socioeconomic board, among the offspring of the college-educated as well as the offspring of Hispanic immigrants.

Jill Stewart, a writer for the *Los Angeles Weekly*, visited a second-grade classroom at a highly regarded school on Los Angeles's wealthy Westside. There she met a little girl who wrote "I go t gum calls" for "I go to gym class" in a journal that was entirely free of punctuation (which hadn't been taught yet). In another classroom, a 7-year-old boy had gotten by with memorizing the "shared reading" story that the teacher had read over and over but could not actually read a single word of the story on his own. At one Los Angeles school parents held nacho sales to buy their classrooms forbidden spellers. In Charles Sykes's book *Dumbing Down Our Kids*, a mother complained that her fourth-grade daughter had received a grade of check-plus (above average) and a teacher's notation of "Wow!" for these sentences: "I'm goin to has majik skates. Im goin to go to disenelan. Im goin to bin my mom and dad and brusr and sisd. We r go to se mickey mouse."

In 1996 California officially dumped whole language. (After parents there discovered that their fourth-graders couldn't do long division, a similar, equally successful grassroots rebellion overthrew another constructivist fad promoted by education schools, "fuzzy" mathematics--in which children aren't taught standard computations, the multiplication tables, or common formulas, but spend hours of class time pretending to be Pythagoras and trying to reinvent his theorem with sheets of colored paper.) A short time after the whole-language revolt, the Los Angeles Unified School District mandated the use of Open Court Reading, a phonics-based instruction program marketed by McGraw-Hill that happens to pass muster with Reading First. Deborah Jewell-Sherman's decision to mandate Voyager Universal Literacy in Richmond also preceded Reading First. Indeed, after the California debacle, the education-school establishment began a strategic retreat in its antagonism toward phonics instruction. Many whole-language people now prefer to use the term "balanced literacy," which means weaving a bit of phonics weft into the whole-language warp.

The scandal that prompted Christopher Doherty's resignation from Reading First last fall was essentially a playing out of the decades-old antagonism between the whole-language proponents, whose numbers are huge, representing most of the faculty members at most education schools, and the reading-science proponents, whose numbers are small but whose philosophy of reading instruction the No Child Left Behind Act was specifically designed to protect. Doherty's behavior was crude and imprudent--it is always a mistake to send, as he did, emails using four- and seven-letter vulgarities to refer to his whole-language antagonists--but he was certainly within his rights under the law he administered to do exactly as he did, which was to prevent whole-language programs from benefiting from Reading First grants.

The charges of "steering" largely stemmed from Doherty's targeting for exclusion one particular program called Reading Recovery, a widely used but controversial \$9,000-a-year-per-student tutorial system that says it is scientifically based but actually uses a methodology similar to that of whole language that has been criticized as ineffective by

some researchers. Doherty's abrasive personality got him into trouble, but he also got caught between the language of *No Child Left Behind*, which forbids the recommendation of specific instructional programs, and the brute reality of reading politics, which has meant that only a handful of experts have developed a handful of products that are genuinely based on scientific research.

Doherty's downfall turned out to be a godsend to the whole-language people, who had hitherto been grasping at such straws as possible miscalculations in the improved test scores reported by the Education Department, doubts about the efficacy of instruction in phonemic awareness, hints that whole language, like Marxism, had never been properly tried, and the perennial complaint that children taught how to read directly don't understand what they read. Attacking the very idea of standardized testing was another perennial tactic, as was politicization. Kenneth Goodman accused reading-science experts of being "part of an orchestrated campaign by the far right" to discredit his theories, implying that phonics advocates were mostly home-schooling fundamentalists who spent their spare time bombing abortion clinics. Actually, many of those experts are far more likely to vote the straight Democratic ticket. Diane Ravitch is a fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, Louisa Moats is a Bush antagonist quick to point out that she believes in global warming and opposes the war in Iraq. Now, after the Doherty scandal, there is a new bullet in the anti-Reading First clip: the argument that the program mostly benefits the "commercial" companies that publish readers and other textbooks for profit. That might be a damning accusation were it not for the fact that most textbook companies astutely play both sides of the reading science/whole language fence. Houghton Mifflin, for example, publishes the basal readers used at Ginter Park Elementary and also the storybooks used in many a whole-language class.

Certainly Reading First has its defects: Doherty got caught in the trap of the law's insufficiently specific language about which programs are sufficiently proven to qualify for grants. And *No Child Left Behind* has defects of its own. It is loathed on the left because of its strict accountability requirements and on the right because it doesn't require enough accountability. It leaves states free to jigger their tests so that students will show enough progress to keep the federal money flowing. Both ends of the ideological spectrum are likely to push hard for changes, but with a Democratic Congress it is highly likely that "changes" will mean a watering down of standards. For the dazzlingly successful Reading First program, that would be too bad. Both houses of Congress approved legislation last month cutting appropriations for Reading First, an ominous sign. Last week in Philadelphia, all the leading Democratic presidential candidates stopped in at the annual meeting of the National Education Association, where *No Child Left Behind* has the same status as pet food from China--and duly promised drastic "overhauls" in the act that could scuttle Reading First altogether.

The future of Ginter Park Elementary is uncertain, too. Richmond's school system is expensive to operate, and Jewell-Sherman is often at loggerheads with the city's mayor, Douglas Wilder, the former governor of Virginia. Right now, the third-graders of Ginter Park go to school in a cocoon of lavish attention and top-notch instruction. Soon enough, though, they will reach inner-city adolescence with all its temptations, and Richmond, despite its tremendous educational strides, is still beset with hellhole middle and high schools and a dropout rate of nearly 47 percent. Yet Ginter Park's principal, Cathy

Randolph, has plenty of hope. "I feel these children will be successful," she said. "I know they'll be successful." Certainly her school has done more than most to give them that chance.

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