

Is Curriculum Dissection Truly a Threat? A Response to Robinson

Patrick Groff

Robinson has sounded a false alarm. The curriculum must be organized in teachable sequence.

Robinson raises a school issue that is as ancient and as basic as the nature-nurture controversy. She points to the equally long-standing and unsettled problem: should we analyze curriculum down to its smallest components, skills, or subskills, and then teach these diminutive units in a systematic way? Or should we practice holistic instruction, guided by the theory that the entities of the curriculum are composites always greater than the sum of their parts? Robinson asks, for example, "What happened to the idea that children learn to write by writing?" And by extrapolation, one might continue, to learn to read by reading—and to learn historical, geographical, mathematical, and scientific content simply by doing problem-solving projects.

For that matter, the current advocates of holistic learning contend, why break up what goes on in schools into curricular components such as reading or mathematics at all? Why not allow children to gain knowledge in schools without categorizing what this information is? And to learn by any means available? Why, in fact, should schools be the special place where children are taught to read

—rather than merely to experience or explore reality? The degrees to which the arguments for holistic learning have been extended indeed are impressive.

Reading

Robinson is convinced that reading instruction "suffers from masses of hierarchical skills and subskills." She appears distressed that for the purpose of their reading development children are taught to actively dissect words into syllables and phonemes. She finds discouraging the practice of teaching children to vigorously sound out words and to analyze them into their affixes and root morphemes.

Sara Lundsteen, whose views on reading instruction Robinson quotes with approval, insists that the teaching of phonics will lead to boredom and confusion in children about the uses of reading. Her advice to teachers is: "When it comes to phonics in reading instruction the motto 'Just a little dab will do you' seems appropriate" (Groff, 1977, p. 199).

Those who argue that reading suffers from intensive teaching of a comprehensive hierarchy of skills and subskills (as in phonics) can find no support for this assumption from the empirical research. In expressing this view, they come into conflict with a host of critical reviews of the research as to the

relative effectiveness of thoroughgoing phonics instruction and direct teaching.

In 1967 Chall made the most comprehensive critique of the research to that date on the relative values of decoding (phonics) instruction. She found that "the research from 1912 to 1965 indicates that a code-emphasis method—that is, one that views beginning reading as essentially different from mature reading and emphasizes learning of the printed code for the spoken language—produces better results" than do holistic approaches to reading. There have been several other critical surveys of the research on the acquisition of reading made since 1967 that support Chall's conclusions about this matter (Desberg and Berdiansky, 1970; Kavanagh and Mattingly, 1972; Dykstra, 1974; Gibson and Levin, 1975; Murray and Pikulski, 1975; Guthrie and others, 1976; Wallach and Wallach, 1976; Anderson, and others, 1976; La-

Berge and Samuels, 1977; Reber and Scarborough, 1977; Resnick and Weaver, 1978; Weaver, 1978; Carnine and Silbert, 1979).

Robinson would be hard pressed to find evidence to support her negative criticisms of the direct teaching of reading. Recent studies of her hypothesis (Bennett, 1976; Guthrie, 1977) agree with Berliner and Rosenshine (1977). Their intensive studies of this issue revealed that "The classroom behavior of a successful teacher is characterized by direct instruction, whereby students are brought into contact with the curriculum materials and kept in contact with them until the requisite knowledge is acquired" (p. 393).

Robinson's concern that the "time consumed on the numerous fragments [in reading instruction] displaces that needed for various types of holistic activities" thus seems unwarranted. That is, if close attention to these "fragments," as is given in phonics

teaching, results in superior reading comprehension (as the research says it does), Robinson seems to worry unnecessarily about this matter. To make the statement, as Robinson does, that, "Children who are struggling to read . . . may be drowning in a sea of subdivided skills" is worse than pointless—it is dangerous (unless one can prove it). Significantly enough, Robinson cites no empirical evidence to substantiate this notion.

Specialization

Robinson is not so radical in her defense of holistic learning that she would join those who would abandon the traditional boundaries of school subjects, but she is opposed to an elementary school teacher becoming prepared as a specialist in a curriculum area. She maintains that if I were to be trained as an elementary language arts specialist, I would inevitably forego complex problem-solving

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"The whole of learning to read . . . cannot be taught all at once . . . [It] involves a progressive and gradual acquisition of ever more difficult skills and subskills."

projects, valuing, higher level cognitive skill development, extensive units of study, field trips, dramatic productions, and murals in my work with pupils. As a consequence of this training, I would likely become more devoted to superfluous minutiae, she insists.

Robinson and I could contend back and forth about whether such a deplorable state of affairs would result. I believe my special training would prepare me to offer more resourceful and creative language arts programs and more effective teaching to the individual language needs of pupils.

The empirical evidence on departmentalized teaching in the elementary school unfortunately is of little help in settling this dispute. Most of the available evidence suggests that departmentalization results in a significantly greater pupil achievement (Heathers, 1969). In general, however, research studies on this topic are limited in number and of poor quality. Researchers have shown little interest in the subject for at least a decade.

Nevertheless, the findings from studies that have been done hardly allow one to condemn departmentalized teaching in the manner Robinson does.

Other Arguments

Robinson has correctly passed on the opinions of previous writers that she favors—writers who dislike an emphasis on the teaching of basic skills, who decry the purported acceptance of individualized instruction as the total educational program, and who complain about the "dumping" of "new information in the elementary curriculum."

But what is wrong with a renewed interest among teachers in making sure that children learn the basic skills? Surely the overwhelming and widely-publicized evidence of declining achievement in basic skills suggests we should deal with such problems in a thorough and systematic manner. And, as noted, there is abundant empirical evidence on hand that intensive and methodical teaching of the skills of literacy can better help children learn to read than can holistic approaches.

In how many school systems, one must inquire, can one find individualized instruction designed to be the total educational program? Another of Robinson's fears, that this policy is widespread and deep seated in elementary schools, seems unsubstantiated. As for her apprehensions that new information is getting into the schools "which enhances the understanding of adults" but which supposedly "just clutters the curriculum" of children, one must protest. On what authority does Robinson base her judgment that this new information is not properly conducive to the learning of children? Is it not anti-intellectual, in fact, to decide that the "remarkable discoveries about words, sentence formation, dialects, and other aspects of language," do not help children communicate better?

Conclusions

On the whole, Robinson's article must be seen as a false alarm. I do not believe that elementary school educators have lost sight of holistic learning. It is far more likely they have become

sophisticated enough about curriculum to realize that unless children develop a command of the details of any given body of knowledge, they will not be able to use their powers of critical and creative thinking.

Moreover, the whole/part controversy that Robinson revives is more than an example of the chicken-or-egg conundrum. One can recognize that an entity of learning is more than the sum of its parts but, legitimately contend that the parts must be arranged into a teachable sequence in order for the whole to emerge from the thinking of a learner. The whole of learning to read, for example, cannot be taught all at once. There must be movement toward the realization of this skill by the learner that involves a progressive and gradual acquisition of ever more difficult skills and subskills. Admittedly, one cannot propose a hierarchy of reading skills that meets everyone's satisfaction. However, the contention is false that establishing a meticulous organizational scheme in teaching will inevitably interfere with the development of children's powers of reading comprehension.

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Evelyn Robinson replies:

My paper carefully and persistently calls for balance and moderation in the use of teaching approaches. It applauds the development of new analyses and promising educational trends, then deplores their misguided or excessive use.

My position is emphatically not one of either/or, the dichotomy of which I regard as a philosophical trap. Groff has been caught in it. This trap has been the bane of education for years, causing Dewey endless distress which resulted in *Experience and Education*, among other writings. Analytic and holistic teaching are not necessarily incompatible.

Link interview

(continued from page 571)

by giving them a watered-down curriculum, by never challenging them in the areas these instruments are designed for. Can you imagine being in a high school math lab and being given third grade material? I mean, the motivation is dead—they're way beyond that. And that's what I call the hit-and-run curriculum: "Well, if we can just teach them to compute or to get through this next text, we'll have done a little something." That's nonsense.

Where adolescents are developmentally is ready to develop higher cognitive structures. You don't give them watered-down content; you stretch and develop those abilities so they can learn to solve problems at higher cognitive levels.

M: A number of recent studies, including reports of the National Assessment of Educational Progress in mathematics, paint a pretty dismal picture of student problem-solving abilities. Could IE change that?

Link: I want to help prove that all youth, especially inner-city students, can learn, and learn at higher cognitive levels. You mention National Assessment. I was excited to hear the educational leadership finally saying, "Sure, students can compute a little better, but they're not being taught problem solving, which means they're not being taught how to think." We now have a curriculum to intervene. *ET*

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