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OVERVIEW

RECURRING RHYTHMS

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A few years ago in Memphis, I left Project Head Start training full of idealism and commitment. We had been sensitized to the needs of young children in general and poor children in particular. Then, at the school, I was shocked to discover that these mostly black disadvantaged children would, in 1st grade, use readers illustrated with the pictures and lifestyles of middle-class whites.

A little later I read how Sylvia Ashton-Warner had found the same kind of error in the British primers she was expected to use to teach Maori children in New Zealand. Instead, she began to develop organic vocabulary and to help her students write their own primers for learning how to read. Naturally I soon had my kindergartners asking for words they wanted on word cards—*Batman* and *Robin* were hot favorites for a time—and writing stories every day.

Eventually I came to see these errors as missed opportunities to connect the world of school learning with the lives of students. Teaching, after all, is the act of balancing what the learner is and knows against what (someone has decided) the learner needs to know and be. If we concentrate too much on what the learner is and knows, we get "touchy-feely," lose rigor, and foster narcissism and narrow-mindedness. If we overemphasize what (someone has decided) the learner needs to know and be, we become harsh and rigid, lose the joy of learning, and create boredom and alienation. This dancing back and forth between the demands of the curriculum and the culture and interests of the individual student is one of the recurring rhythms in education.

Currently in a mood to connect school learning more fully with students' lives, many teachers and administrators are re-examining their views of reading and writing instruction. For example, in preparing to explain her philosophy to a student teacher, Zelene Lovitt (p. 43) found that when she began integrating language arts instruction in her classroom, she had discarded some of her earlier assumptions. This kind of examination must

have preceded the teaching and learning described by Julie Jensen and Nancy Roser (p. 7), whose classroom vignettes portray teachers and students in action in the literate communities described by Gordon Wells (p. 13). Inviting us inside the reader's head, Rob Tierney (p. 37) explains the understanding of text as a creative endeavor: comprehension is not a sequence of skills but the construction of meaning—it incorporates the author's message, of course, *and* the reader's background knowledge and intent.

Teachers of young children have long understood that literacy emerges in print-rich environments. Dorothy Strickland (p. 18) illuminates their traditions with new perspectives from research. And, lest teachers of older students think the integration of language instruction is not for them, there is Eliot Wigginton (p. 30). Approaching the 25th anniversary of *Foxfire*, he testifies to the durability of such ideas as student ownership, cooperation, and real-world tasks.

Even from these authors, we hear calls for balance. Wigginton notes the careful incorporation of state objectives into his students' work. Patricia Robbins (p. 50) explains clearly the importance of structure within a whole-language program that is now 10 years' old. Elfrieda Hiebert and Charles Fisher (p. 62) caution that the whole-language classrooms they observed were not balanced with regard to small group work, the use of expository text, and the extension of constructivist methods to other subjects.

We've come a long way since I first taught Head Start. Now it's easy to find books of all sorts that reflect our cultural diversity. But we've been carried away with skills, drills, and testing; and many a student is as distant from school learning now as then. If this issue of *Educational Leadership* offers any insights into the connectedness between what your students know and are and what your curriculum intends they'll be and know—well, that's what we hoped for. □

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