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VIRGINIA NELMS

Not a Balanced Assessment: A Response to Freyd and Lytle

It is not possible here to address all the issues raised in Freyd and Lytle's critique. Instead, I will speak to a few major points in each area they considered to demonstrate that the critique, although it raises a few excellent points, is not a fair and balanced assessment of the Writing to Read program.

Language Learning Paradigm

Freyd and Lytle examine three parts of the language learning paradigm underlying the program.

Initial teaching alphabets. The authors erroneously equate the inventive spelling aspect of the WTR program with the Initial Teaching Alphabet (i/t/a) approach, which was developed as

a means of avoiding the irregularities of English orthography in the beginning stages of reading and writing. I/t/a involved the use of a *modified* alphabet, whereas WTR uses *standard English spelling patterns from the beginning*. The 42 phonemes represented in WTR are encoded using the most common English spellings for those sounds. So, unlike children using i/t/a, WTR children do not have to *unlearn* a writing system; they simply have to expand it to include less frequently used spelling patterns.

Based on their misconception of the similarities between the two programs, Freyd and Lytle inappropriately apply criticisms raised about i/t/a to the WTR program; for example, the lack of appro-

prate (i.e., printed in i/t/a) reading materials. With the WTR program, however, children are not intended to read books printed in their simplified spelling system. In addition to books printed in standard English orthography at the Listening Library Station, children's own writings and those of their classmates are a source of motivating reading material. Further, their conclusion that i/t/a didn't work is challenged by Aukerman (1984), who expresses mystification at why i/t/a has gone into disuse "in light of the impressive results reported from schools where i/t/a was used" (p. 304).

Phonics for writing/reading. Although Freyd and Lytle correctly recognize that WTR uses an initial sound-letter (encoding) approach as opposed to the

traditional letter-sound (decoding) approach, they then criticize WTR on the basis of research on decoding programs. In that they have referenced the well-known work of Read (1986) and Chomsky (1979) elsewhere in their article, it is surprising that they chose to overlook the extensive research on inventive spelling that focuses on encoding rather than decoding as an initial emphasis for learning writing/reading through phonics. This literature is consistent with the inventive spelling approach taken in WTR.

In addition, research on early readers indicates many children use invented spelling and develop their own spelling systems. However, not all children have the exposure to written language and the feedback from parents and siblings that encourage them to experiment with our written language system. For children who have not worked out a system of their own, WTR offers a tool. Moreover, WTR students do not rely exclusively on the phonemic spellings presented in the cycle words but, rather, use a combination of the phonemic spellings as presented, invented spellings, and conventional spellings. By encouraging them to use phonemic spellings for words they don't know, WTR builds their confidence as writers who can and do freely express themselves.

Finally, an examination of the writing done by students in WTR programs shows students in kindergarten and 1st grade producing stories they otherwise would not have written. Freyd and Lytle are correct in stating that administrators, teachers, and parents are excited about WTR, for it has provided a vehicle that promotes student writing!

Whole-language perspective. There is little agreement on the precise meaning of the term *whole language* or the practices associated with this philosophy (see Clay 1987). Thus, criticisms of any program for not being "pure" whole language are absurd. The fact that the heart of WTR is children's personal writing makes the program an excellent complement to a whole-language philosophy. That children acquire the tools they need to do personal writing from the computer instead of from an overworked teacher is an asset of the program, not a limitation.

Computer Phonics Program Design

Freyd and Lytle criticize the computer phonics component of WTR and suggest that the phonics instruction could be implemented without it. The real strength of this aspect of WTR is that it ensures that *every child* has the individualized teaching needed to learn the letter/sound correspondences before advancing to the next program cycle. This type of one-to-one attention could never be provided by one teacher (not even by a teacher and an aide). The notion of conducting a similar program without the computer or with a different computer program is unrealistic.

Evaluation of Research on WTR

The most disappointing aspect of Freyd and Lytle's review is their evaluation of the research. Their critique provides practically no information about the methodological details of the 17 studies, mostly unpublished, that they claim to have reviewed. The reader is entirely dependent on the objectivity and thoroughness of the reviewers.

For example, to understand Zurn's (1987) findings, it is necessary to examine her original research in its entirety. Had Freyd and Lytle done so, they would have found that Zurn counted the number of cycle words used by students to ascertain if any constraints were placed on student's writing by the introduction of the cycle words. Zurn found that once students grasped the phonemes, they did not rely on the cycle words for story ideas but, rather, wrote from their own experiences. Likewise, contrary to Freyd and Lytle's report, the children in the study *did* show a significant difference in before-and-after comparisons of their writing.

Freyd and Lytle's summary table of the findings of the 17 studies they reviewed shows that WTR classes produced positive results in 20 comparisons and negative results in 1. According to them, the remainder of the comparisons produced nonsignificant findings. Objectively, this pattern seems to provide quite strong support in favor of the WTR program, yet the authors draw contrary conclusions!

Their criticisms of the studies suggest an unfamiliarity with the realities

of classroom-based educational research. For example, they fault all the studies on the grounds that "none of the studies uses a true experimental design: for example, none randomly assigns kindergartners to treatment and control groups; nor have teachers been randomly assigned in any of the studies." These alleged faults are the reality of research in schools. Quasi-experimental designs (Cook and Campbell 1979) are the norm. Only in controlled laboratory settings is it possible to attain an ideal degree of control. It is almost unknown in school-based research that children and teachers are randomly assigned to treatments in classrooms. Thus, this criticism is either naive or intentionally unfair.

As noted earlier, Freyd and Lytle acknowledge, by their own observations and the results of surveys, that students, parents, teachers, and administrators "like the program," and they summarize the findings of studies that demonstrate generally positive result supporting the effectiveness of the program. It is, therefore, difficult to understand why they chose to quote a personal communication from Robert Slavin to draw negative conclusions about the program.

The ETS Study

Their criticism of the ETS study indicates the summative data were analyzed for a sample (i.e., not the total) population. ETS chose a sample from the "over 10,000 kindergarten and grade 1 students" who participated in the study. ETS felt no need to use 10,000 plus data points. This is common statistical practice.

The authors have misinterpreted the ETS conclusion. ETS found that WTR students write better than non-WTR students for both kindergarten and grade 1; likewise, WTR students spell slightly better than non-WTR students. It is important to remember that the goal of the spelling assessment was not to determine if WTR students spell better; rather, the goal was to assure that they did not spell any worse! The reading assessment for 1st grade utilized norm comparisons. The WTR grade 1 students performed, on the average, about 15 percentile points above the norm reference groups.

Freyd and Lytle also fault the study's length; however, the ETS evaluation was a two-year undertaking. The first year was formative, and the second year summative. Pre- and post-achievement data were gathered during the school testing cycle, which in most schools extends from November to May. Input from observational data, interviews, surveys, and questionnaires was gathered throughout the two-year period. ETS used school reading achievement data because this is the most common measure schools employ to gauge success.

Cost Considerations

To compare the cost of the WTR program with that of other programs would require a complete analysis of the costs of a variety of program approaches, including the hidden costs of "special educators" for those children who do not learn to read and write in their regular classroom programs. Also, the additional benefits of having computers in the schools must be considered in the equation, and these costs must be amortized over the life of the computers. In their

critique, Freyd and Lytle have not undertaken a serious analysis of the costs and benefits of the WTR program.

A False Impression

Freyd and Lytle's article gives the impression that for a corporation to involve itself in a major way in language arts education is somehow new and unique to IBM. Major publishing companies have, in fact, been extremely influential in language arts education for many years (Chall 1967, 1983); their products have been the mainstay of language arts programs. Surely IBM, a company of outstanding reputation, should be allowed the same rights as other corporations to compete in the language education market. The exceptional popularity of the Writing to Read program with school administrators, teachers, parents, and children should be a basis for giving the corporation credit rather than abuse. □

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Let the Readers Decide: A Response to Nelms

There are a few points in Nelms' response to our article that we would like to reply to.

1. *Initial teaching alphabets*. Nelms argues that the Writing to Read phonemic spelling system is different from other nonstandard initial writing systems. Her chief argument is that "WTR children do not have to *unlearn* a writing system." We wonder just what processes are involved, then, in moving from a system that uses diacritical marks to standard English.

2. *Phonics for writing/reading*. Nelms tell us that "an examination of the writing done by students in WTR programs shows students in kindergarten and 1st grade producing stories which they otherwise would not have

written." Are we really to believe that no kindergarten and 1st grade students have produced such stories without Writing to Read? It is precisely undocumented assertions such as this that lie at the heart of our criticism.

Most of the 17 studies we reviewed have severe limitations.

3. *Whole-language perspective*. We, too, advocate the use of computers wherever they can be used to create supportive learning environments for students and teachers. Since WTR was conceived, however, technology has advanced to a point where programs can be far more interactive and open and can, consequently, fit more comfortably into the variety of practices referred to as "whole language."

4. *Computer phonics program design*. Nelms avoids our main point: since the computer phonics program is integral to WTR, this component should be compared to other computer programs that claim to teach or reinforce letter/sound correspondence. On the other hand, Nelms states that "the heart of

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