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To Read or Not to Read: A Comprehensive Study of Effective Reading and Methods of Teaching Reading

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Abstract

The ability to read written language proficiently is an important skill in modern society; however, reading seems to be a lost art in many ways. In order to correct this problem, educators must determine the most effective method for teaching reading to elementary students. The most prominent methods include the whole language method, the phonetic method, and the balanced method. Research on the techniques, advantages, disadvantages, and case studies associated with each method indicates that the most effective method for teaching reading to elementary students is the balanced method.

To Read or not to Read: A Comprehensive Study of Effective Reading and Methods of Teaching Reading

In the modern educated world, particularly in the United States, communication is a fundamental skill necessary for success in every venue of life. We are constantly bombarded with communicated messages, whether they are encoded in spoken, written, or visual forms. Consequently, one of the essential components of the effective use of communication is the ability to read written language proficiently; however, reading seems to be a lost art in our modern society. Although the majority of the population can read, many children, teenagers, and adults seriously struggle with this highly important skill, making it necessary to determine what steps educators need to take to improve reading aptitude amongst the general public. For these reasons, this thesis will seek to comprehensively define reading, clarify why reading is such an imperative skill in contemporary culture, explore several variant models for teaching reading, summarize case studies and surveys dealing with the effectiveness of these models, and finally, based upon this research, suggest which method of teaching reading produces the best overall results.

A Definition of Reading

Components of Successful Reading

In order to determine the best method for teaching reading, it is important to understand exactly what reading is. On the surface, reading is simply the capacity to understand a written language, in this case the English language; however, truly implementing strong reading skills requires much more than surface knowledge.

Reading is an active process which requires the use of multiple skills simultaneously (Walker, 2000). Spache and Spache (1969) describe reading this way:

> The reader directs his attention to the printed page with his mind intent on meaning. He reacts to each word with a group of mental associations regarding the word form, its meaning, and its sound. With the aid of these associations, he discriminates this word from all others, also using clues of general configuration, distinctive characteristics of the shape, some of the letters or syllables, and the implications of the sense or pattern of the sentence. Thus, the process begins with word recognition. As the meanings of successive words become clear, they are fused into thought or ideas. (p. 4)

Thus, among other abilities, successful reading requires phonemic awareness, an ability to decode unfamiliar words, word attack skills, and an understanding of language structure (Honig, 2001). This means that accomplished readers recognize letters and words, know how to pronounce them correctly, understand what they mean, and know how these words work together in phrases and sentences to create meaningful language. Fluency, the rate and accuracy with which students read, is another crucial component of reading. Successful readers develop this important skill only through extensive practice. As Honig (2001) said, "Students become fluent readers by reading" (p. 67).

The Key to Successful Reading: Comprehension

However, these skills alone do not make a successful reader. Instead, the key to successful reading is in its application, or comprehension, not in just being able to skim over the words or say them correctly aloud. As Chall (1967) claims, "Reading is the meaningful interpretation of symbols—a process through which we understand. It is a

process of communication between readers and writers, and a means to an end. It is not an end in itself" (p. 54). Therefore, the end goal of reading is comprehension. Comprehension is a "clear grasp of what is read at the levels of literal meanings, implied meanings, and possible applications beyond the author's meanings" (Spache & Spache, 1969, p. 460). It requires the reader to utilize previously learned knowledge and knowledge gained from the passage to discover meaning. Therefore, comprehension relies heavily on word meaning, ideas, and reasoning (Spache & Spache, 1969).

The Importance of Reading

The ability to read is a skill necessary for success in today's society. But, what makes it so important? According to Walker (2000), reading serves a variety of functions including "reading for pleasure, reading for information, and reading to remember" (p. 15).

Reading as Necessary to Reach Academic Goals

Although some exceptional learners already know the basics of reading by the time they reach elementary school, the average student learns to read during his or her first years at the primary level of education. Consequently, one of the main goals or standards of learning for elementary school classrooms is each student's acquisition of the ability to read efficiently. In fact, all other educational goals are somewhat dependent on a given student's ability to read. If a student cannot read and comprehend written language, how can he or she be expected to excel in other content areas which will inevitably require some reading ability? Sadly, research has shown that students who cannot read grade-level material fall farther and farther behind during their school

careers. A study conducted by Juel (1994) found that "only one out of eight children who are not reading at grade level by the end of first grade will ever go on to read at grade level" (p. 24). However, educational experts believe that significant numbers of these below-average readers can become successful readers with effective initial teaching or rapid supplemental intervention when reading problems become apparent (Honig, 2001). For this reason, researchers should give much attention to discovering the most successful methods of teaching reading in the elementary school. This is just one reason why reading is such an imperative skill for all elementary students to learn.

Reading as Necessary to Reach Career Goals

Secondly, the opportunity to attain further education and high-skilled careers is directly dependent on a given person's ability to read. Employers expect prospective employees to be knowledgeable in all things relating to their area of expertise. Much valuable information regarding new developments and discoveries in career fields can be obtained by reading scholarly journals and other professional publications. Consequently, without the ability to read, professional development is nearly impossible.

Reading as an Enjoyable Activity

Finally, reading can be a relaxing and enjoyable pastime. It can serve as an escape. Reading also expands one's knowledge about the world around them and subjects that interest them.

The Process of Learning to Read

In order to determine the most effective method for teaching reading, it is necessary to explore how humans learn to read. Learning to read is a complex process involving multiple parts of the brain and several developmental stages that every prospective reader must progress through. In other words, a child cannot simply pick up a book and automatically reach comprehension. Prior to comprehension, beginning readers must build a foundation of skills essential to learning to read successfully.

Reading and the Human Brain

Scientists have used MRI technology to map the parts of the brain used for reading. This extensive research has shown that reading is not a purely visual process. Instead, three separate areas of the brain interact to facilitate reading: one which stores visual information, one which stores auditory information, and one which stores information about meaning (Shaywitz, 1996). As a result, beginning readers must learn to use these parts of their brain in tandem to construct meaning and reach comprehension. Furthermore, using eye movement research, scientists have also proven that skilled readers "do look at virtually every word" and "accurately perceive every letter in each word, not linearly but in chunks" (Kolers, 1976, p. 376). This breakthrough research provides evidence regarding the importance of learning letters and decoding skills.

The Importance of Letters

Research has shown that recognizing letter shapes and learning letter names is a crucial component of the process of learning to read. Beginning readers progress much more quickly if they have previously learned the alphabet. First, children who

recognize the letters learn letter sounds and word spellings quicker than children who cannot distinguish between letters. Second, children who recognize letters can concentrate on recognizing patterns of letters—a crucial component of skilled reading. Finally, children who recognize letters often have a better grasp of the alphabetic principle that letters have corresponding sounds that create words when combined (Adams, 1990). Furthermore, the process of learning letters and their names can be as simple as learning the alphabet song or displaying letter charts around the classroom.

Automaticity

Automaticity, or the ability to recognize individual words rapidly, effortlessly, and unconsciously is a critical step in the process of learning to read. Beginning readers reach automaticity in two ways: decoding and lexical knowledge. Decoding is the ability to sound out words. This skill helps beginning readers understand how printed words relate to the sound of spoken words. On the other hand, lexical knowledge is the memorized knowledge of the internal letter structure of words. Research has shown that decoding is the more productive way to reach automaticity because beginning readers who rely primarily on lexical knowledge have no way to decipher unfamiliar words. Furthermore, relying solely on memorization of the spelling of individual words becomes tedious, if not impossible. For example, there are more than 10,000 variations of the basic three-letter CVC word alone (Honig, 2001). On the other hand, beginning readers who repetitively decode a specific word, connect the spelling to sounds (phonological recoding) and easily commit the spelling patterns of that word to memory. Share and Stanovich (1995b) call this model the self-teaching model: they claim that “each time the letters in the word are read successfully, the

sound is heard mentally, the pathways for access get stronger, and that word becomes a little easier to recognize the next time it is encountered, until reading it becomes automatic" (p.13). This process usually occurs four to five times before the word becomes automatic (Honig, 2001). However, as mentioned before, fluency and automaticity are not the end goals of the reading process. Instead, the benchmark of successful reading is comprehension.

Comprehension

The end goal of the process of learning to read is comprehension. In order to comprehend a reading selection, accomplished readers rely on two sources of meaning: individual words and the passage as a whole. Honig (2001) claims that "the key to unlocking meaning starts with the automatic recognition of each written word, which brings the meaning of that word to consciousness" (p. 17). In other words, a successful reader must be able to automatically recognize and understand individual words so he can concentrate on the more complex task of understanding the passage as a whole. In fact, the effective reader must automatically recognize at least 95% of the words in a passage—otherwise reading comprehension decreases (Honig, 2001). These vital skills are where most reading difficulties observed in modern society occur, but how do we correct this serious problem? The answer lies in the effective teaching of reading at the primary level.

Methods of Teaching Reading

In recent years, various methods of teaching reading have been the continuous subject of a great deal of highly animated debate among educational committees, teachers, and parents. Although numerous educational techniques for teaching reading

exist, these methods more or less fall into two widely variant categories, namely whole language systems and phonetic systems. However, whole language and phonetic methods can also be melded together to create a balanced system for teaching reading to elementary students.

The Whole Language Reading Methods

Whole language methods are more commonly known as language experience or whole-to-part methods. In the past, educators extensively used these methods to teach reading to elementary students, but today these methods are used mostly in conjunction with the phonetic method. Whole language methods of teaching reading implement a belief in the importance of learning meaning first and then applying that meaning to written language (Bovee, 1972). Spache (1969) states that "more than any other approach to the teaching of reading, the language-experience approach conceives of learning to read as part of the process of language development. It alone recognizes the close relationship among reading, speaking, writing, and listening" (p. 170). Proponents of this method believe that elementary students will "acquire [reading] skills […] by being read to, immersion in print, and learning them in the context of reading for meaning" (Honig, 2001, p. 2).

Whole language techniques. According to Jeynes and Littell (2000):

> The core of the whole language construct seems to involve emphasis on (1) whole pieces of literature and functional language as opposed to abridgements, adaptations, or segmented tests; (2) individual students' choice as opposed to teacher-sponsored, whole-class assignments; and (3) integrated language experiences as opposed to direct instruction in isolated skill sequences. (p. 24)

Specific educational techniques that fall within the broad category of whole language methods include, but are not limited to, the word method, the sentence method, and the story method (Bovee, 1972). These techniques integrate reading with the other language arts, such as speaking, writing, and listening (Honig, 2001). For example, the teacher reads a whole message, either a sentence or an entire passage, to the students repeatedly. Then, the students memorize and recite the passages individually and as a group. Another whole language technique consists of students dictating a story or personal experience to the teacher. The teacher writes each student's words down. The students then memorize and recite their story (Matthes, 1972). Whole language proponents recognize these activities as "reading" (Heilman, 1998, p. 10). In this way, the whole language method of reading is a child-centered curriculum and as such stresses the importance of developing individualized reading programs (Heilman, 1998).

Advantages of the whole language method. The primary advantage of the whole language method is its child-centered philosophy. Whole language methods are extremely personal and individualized, instilling a love of reading in students by actively engaging them in the process of reading and giving it meaning. These methods integrate speaking, writing, and listening into reading instruction (Spache & Spache, 1969). This practice allows students to understand at an early stage that "reading is no more than talk written down" (Stauffer, 1970, p. 24). Thus, whole language methods emphasize the importance of the child as an individual. Secondly, "The whole language movement has improved classrooms by promoting practices that encourage students to read outstanding literature, including both fiction and, more recently, quality

nonfiction; write more; and perceive writing as having a purpose and communicating something important" (Pressley & Rankin, 1994, p. 59). In other words, the whole language movement's personal touch makes reading exciting and instills a love of reading in elementary students. Finally, "contextual and structural clues do accelerate reading in proficient readers" (Honig, 2001, p. 19). For these reasons, the whole language method can be beneficial when teaching elementary students to read.

Disadvantages of the whole language method. Educational researchers' primary criticism of the whole language method of teaching reading is that it is extremely vague. Heilman (1998) notes that the whole language method's "greatest potential strengths and weaknesses stem from the same factor. There is no concise definition of 'what it is' and thus no blueprint for 'how to do it'" (p. 20). Thus, "each teacher evolves his or her own version of whole language instruction" (Jeynes & Littell, 2000, p. 23). This ambiguity creates an instructional method in which teachers do not teach reading skills in a logical sequence, but merely assume that the students will learn them incidentally. Without learning these crucial reading skills, such as decoding and automaticity, students will never reach their fullest potential. Spache and Spache (1969) recognize that:

> At secondary school, collegiate, and adult ages, reading is probably the major source of ideas, personal growth, vocational training, and participation in current events. If the language-experience approach is continued much beyond early primary levels, there is the possibility that it may retard this full development of reading. If the child's own written expression is the major

> source of reading materials in grades above the primary level, his reading experiences and development will be extremely limited. (p. 179)

Furthermore, the whole language system of teaching reading provides no concrete, unbiased method for evaluation of the students' reading skills. Finally, beginning readers who have been taught using the whole language method have no real means of identifying an unfamiliar word (Matthes, 1972). The whole language method teaches beginning readers to use pictorial clues to identify unknown words, but what happens when the student progresses beyond picture books? For these reasons, the whole language method falls short as a useful method for teaching reading to elementary students.

The Phonetic Reading Method

The phonetic method of teaching reading, on the other hand, is more skills-based than the whole language method. It relies on a part-to-whole framework and provides two sub-methods: the analytic and the synthetic phonics methods. The phonetic method requires the teacher to teach reading skills explicitly to students, making it the most widely accepted method for teaching reading. Thus, teachers frequently use the phonetic method to teach reading in the modern elementary classroom. The phonetic method stems from the idea that students must first understand the key elements of language, which include letters, sounds, syllables, and words, before being able to read and reach comprehension.

Phonetic method techniques. Two educational techniques extensively used in elementary classrooms today fall into the phonetic method category, the synthetic method and the analytic method (Bovee, 1972). Both methods "teach beginning

readers that printed letters and letter combinations represent speech sounds heard in words" (Heilman, 1998, p. 1). Basal reading textbooks combine explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness with interesting, age-appropriate stories that allow beginning readers to practice phonics skills. The phonetic methods concentrate on developing two main abilities: phonemic awareness and decoding. Phonemic awareness is the understanding that spoken language is made up of individual sounds (phonemes), and decoding is the ability to turn spellings into sounds or sound words out (Honig, 2001). Children who have developed basic phonemic awareness are capable of isolating, identifying, categorizing, segmenting, blending, and manipulating phonemes in spoken words (Put Reading First, 2003). Lyon (1994) states that "the ability to decode single words accurately and fluently is dependent upon the ability to segment words and syllables into abstract constituent sound units (phonemes)" (p. 124). Thus, these important reading skills are mutually dependent and must be taught simultaneously.

Phonetic instruction generally proceeds through a developmental sequence that explicitly teaches each of the components of phonemic awareness and decoding. Honig suggests the following sequence: 1) word segmentation; 2) rhyme recognition and production; 3) syllable blending, segmentation, and deletion; 4) onset and rime blending; 5) phoneme matching and isolation; 6) phoneme blending and segmentation; and 7) phoneme deletion and substitution. In addition, phonetic instruction also includes mastering the recognition of sight words—high frequency words (Honig, 2001).

Advantages of the phonetic method. The primary advantage of the phonetic method of teaching phonics is its emphasis on direct skill instruction. Honig (2001) claims that "only through direct skill instruction can all children learn to automatically recognize a growing number of words and possess the necessary tools to decipher new words they encounter" (p. 2). As mentioned above, successful reading requires the effortless, unconscious recognition of words. The phonetic method encourages the learning of reading skills such as decoding by explicitly teaching the components of the process. Learning to decode is essential to developing automaticity, a crucial component of the process of learning to read, because decoding allows beginning readers to gather sufficient information about a word, including its sounds and unique letter patterns connected to its meaning, to be able to automatically recognize that word later (Honig, 2001). Research has shown that "children taught to read by a phonics system make rapid progress in word recognition" (Spache & Spache, 1969, p. 486). Other components of reading explicitly taught in the phonetic method include recognizing letter shapes, learning letter names and sounds, understanding the alphabetic principle, recognizing letter patterns, and recognizing words. Thus, systematic, explicit phonics instruction strengthens students' reading skills and accelerates the process of learning to read.

The phonetic system provides many opportunities for students to practice the skills that they are learning. Methods include workbook activities, basal reading textbooks, read-aloud stories, and teacher-led discussion and questioning. Each of these techniques allows elementary students to increase their phonemic awareness, fluency, and reading comprehension. In addition, teachers who use the phonetic

method can objectively test students' acquisition of reading skills. These tested skills include such abilities as detecting rhymes, counting syllables, matching initial sounds, counting phonemes, comparing word lengths, and representing phonemes with letters (Honig, 2001).

Disadvantages of the phonetic method. Regardless of the many advantages of the phonetic method, it does have multiple disadvantages as well. First, phonics instruction can become boring and rigid if taught outside of the context of reading. Frequently, teachers expect students to spend time working on worksheets and learning lists of phonics rules instead of applying phonics to quality literature. Often these rules are not reliable and serve only to confuse beginning readers with technical terms and multiple exceptions (Honig, 2001). Secondly, overemphasizing phonics instruction may cause children to read over-cautiously, slowly, and too analytically (Spache & Spache, 1969). This type of reading instruction is extremely mechanistic and places little emphasis on the key to successful reading—comprehension (Heilman, 1998). Furthermore, teachers tend to rely primarily on basal textbooks and fail to incorporate supplemental literature and activities (Matthes, 1972).

The Balanced Method

The balanced method of teaching reading incorporates ideas from both the whole language and phonetic methods. It includes both explicit, systematic reading instruction and whole-language experience (Honig, 2001). Students practice phonics skills by interacting with and being immersed in quality literature which reinforces reading skills.

Balanced method techniques. The balanced method of teaching reading uses three main strategies to develop reading comprehension skills: 1) explicit, systematic teaching of phonemic awareness, decoding, comprehension strategies, and text organization, 2) discussions about literature, and 3) reading a large amount of varied text. Thus, the balanced method allows teachers to explicitly instruct their students in reading skills such as alphabet recognition, phonemic awareness, the alphabetic principle, phonics, decoding, and other word attack skills while immersing them in language and literature-based activities (Honig, 2001). These reading skills are taught in an active, problem-solving way. For example, teachers can use activities such as making up rhymes, singing songs, completing word sorts, and playing games to allow students to develop phonemic awareness by playing with the sounds of language. Teachers using the balanced method not only teach reading skills but guide their students in discussing and practicing how to use these skills. The balanced method encourages beginning readers to repeatedly read familiar material as well as tackle new material. This combination of familiar and unfamiliar strengthens automaticity. Furthermore, as students recognize more words automatically, they strengthen their ability to decode unfamiliar words by internalizing information about common letter and sound patterns. In this way, one reading skill is used to help develop the others (Honig, 2001).

Recently, educators have begun using basal textbooks that follow the balanced method of teaching reading. These textbooks are concerned with growth in all aspects of reading, including comprehension, decoding, and critical analysis (Matthes, 1972). Basal textbooks that adhere to the balanced method are generally organized into lessons

that teach reading skills using five main techniques: 1) review of sound/symbol relationships and introduction of a new sound, 2) phonemic analysis (segmentation, blending, and manipulation), 3) automaticity practice, 4) story reading, and 5) writing practice. The stories contained in basal textbooks are known as decodable texts. These texts contain three types of words: 1) wholly decodable words, 2) sight words, and 3) nondecodable words. Wholly decodable words are those that can be identified based on phonetic elements. Sight words are high frequency words or story words that are explicitly taught. Finally, nondecodable words are those that are not part of either of the previous categories (Honig, 2001). By using this combination of activities and passages which contain both familiar and unfamiliar words, basal textbooks which follow the balanced method of teaching reading teach valuable reading skills and allow beginning readers ample practice with those skills.

The balanced system of teaching reading also encourages extensive independent reading. Ideally, students should read independently 40 to 60 minutes per day—20 to 30 minutes in school and 20 to 30 minutes outside of school. To achieve this goal, many schools have initiated school-wide reading programs that offer contests and awards for reading (Honig, 2001). When using the balanced system of teaching reading, it is important for teachers to match reading selections to each student's reading level. Otherwise, the student will either become bored because he or she is not being challenged enough or will become confused and frustrated because the text is too difficult for them. Honig (2001) asserts:

> A good rule of thumb is that if students cannot automatically recognize at least 90% of the words, they will become frustrated; if they sail through, recognizing

> 98% of the words, they are missing an opportunity to extend their word learning. […] Students should be recognizing approximately 95% of the words automatically, which means they are decoding (in the sense of figuring out) about one word in twenty. (p. 86)

However, Honig warns that this generalization does not mean that children should never read books that interest them simply because they are too difficult or too easy. In fact, when using the balanced method of teaching reading, teachers should read books above the students' reading level aloud to further increase the students' vocabulary. Furthermore, books read independently should include both literary and informational texts so students increase both their narrative and expository reading comprehension skills (Honig, 2001).

Like the phonetic method of teaching reading, the balanced method requires teachers to evaluate students' reading frequently. These evaluations assess phonemic awareness and background knowledge. The balanced method also allows for a combination of formal and informal reading assessments. For example, a teacher could give a standard paper and pencil test to assess phonemic awareness, or she could discuss each student's progress with them and have them read aloud to her. These frequent assessments allow the teacher to tailor reading instruction to each student's specific needs and match books to individual student's reading levels (Honig, 2001).

Advantages of the balanced method. The balanced method of teaching reading incorporates the most effective strategies from both the whole language and the phonetic methods. Thus, the balanced method is a truly comprehensive program for teaching reading to children. The newly developed basal textbooks provide step-by-

step sequential outlines for teaching reading skills that make reading instruction easier. These curriculums also provide diagnostic tools which help teachers discern their students' strengths and weaknesses. The balanced method also encourages the use of supplemental materials and activities (Matthes, 1972). In these ways, the balanced method teaches crucial reading skills while making reading exciting and fulfilling.

Disadvantages of the balanced method. The balanced method of teaching reading has no immediately discernible disadvantages because it combines the best aspects of both the whole language and phonetic methods. However, the balanced method does require the teacher to integrate explicit instruction and language experiences. This can require extensive planning which becomes time-consuming, but new basal textbooks that follow the balanced method are making this less of a problem.

Case Studies and Surveys Regarding the Effectiveness of the Methods of Teaching Reading

Ineffectiveness of Whole Language Methods

Educational researchers argue that children do not learn to read naturally; therefore, when used independently, whole language or language experience methods are not an effective way to teach reading to elementary students (Pressley & Rankin, 1994). As Spache and Spache (1969) point out, "Few of the reading behaviors we expect to see in comprehension or critical reading, except perhaps vague main ideas and retention of scattered details, appear spontaneously among pupils (p. 470). Secondly, children's reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities and vocabularies do not develop simultaneously. Instead, their reading and writing abilities develop at a much slower rate than their speaking and listening abilities. Therefore, information cannot be

easily transferred from one mode of communication to another at this stage of development (Matthes, 1972). Furthermore, the use of contextual and pictorial clues is not an effective technique for discovering unfamiliar words. In fact, in a study conducted by Share and Stanovich (1995), students who used only context to guess an unfamiliar word were successful merely 10% to 25% of the time. These researchers also noted a correlation between poor reading performance and overdependence on contextual clues. Thus, using pictures and other contextual clues cannot replace learning letter patterns and decoding strategies. In addition, overemphasizing whole-language instruction leads children to believe that reading is a process in which you guess at unrecognized words. For these reasons, Heilman (1998) states that "whole language can fit comfortably at any level of the curriculum except for the period called 'learning to read.' Here, one must develop the skills needed to move into a literature curriculum" (p. 20). In other words, whole language methods are ineffective when used alone in a beginning reading program. Some phonics instruction is necessary in order for elementary students to become accomplished readers.

Importance of Phonetic Methods

Furthermore, researchers argue that explicit reading instruction, including phonics instruction, is "indispensable" (Share & Stanovich, 1995, p. 3). As mentioned above, the human brain attends to virtually every letter in every word when reading. This makes explicit instruction in phonics and word recognition a necessity. In fact, Honig (2001) states that the main problem in students who have difficulty reading is "an inability to recognize, manipulate, and learn the distinct sounds of spoken language (phonemes), and how these sounds correspond to letters and letter patterns in printed

text" (p. 6). He accentuates this point by claiming that a "lack of phonemic awareness is the most powerful predictor of difficulty in learning to read" (Honig, 2001, p. 6). Blevins (1998) even argues that "without a thorough knowledge of letters and an understanding that words are made up of sounds, children cannot learn to read." According to Biemiller (1994), a researcher at the University of Toronto, becoming proficient in reading requires decoding ability and even accomplished readers revert to sounding out when confronted with difficult material or with words that they do not recognize. Juel conducted a study in which she studied a group of children as they progressed from the first to fourth grade. Once the students reached the fourth grade she determined their reading levels based upon reading comprehension and compared these determinations to the results of reading assessments in the lower elementary grades. On a 42-item phonemic awareness scale, the below-average fourth grade readers scored from 4 to 19. On the other hand, the average to above-average fourth grade readers scored from 21 to 38 on the same test. Thus, Juel (1994) concluded that basic phonemic awareness is necessary for beginning readers to learn reading comprehension. In addition, research has shown that the practice provided by the phonetic system is beneficial to beginning readers. For example, writing the letters repeatedly helps children learn to recognize their shapes (Honig, 2001).

However, even proponents of the phonetic method of teaching reading recognize that phonemic awareness and decoding instruction alone are not sufficient to teach reading. Instead, these reading skills are one facet of effective reading instruction. According to Heilman (1998), "Phonics instruction is concerned with teaching letter-sound relationships *only as they relate to learning to read*" (p. 1). Phonetic approaches

to reading are methods for teaching word recognition so that the student can focus on meaning and comprehension (Matthes, 1972). In other words, teachers can overemphasize memorization of phonics rules and terms to the detriment of their students. In fact, too much phonics instruction leads beginning reader to believe that reading is all about sounding out words. Thus, "the optimum amount of phonics instruction a child should receive is the minimum amount she needs to become an independent reader" (Heilman, 1998, p. 31). Matthes (1972) concluded that "phonics should never be employed as a sole method at any level" (p. 47).

Effectiveness of the Balanced Method

If too much whole-language instruction leads children to view reading as a process in which you guess at words you do not know and too much phonics instruction leads them to view it as sounding out words, what approach avoids these problems? As mentioned before, the balanced method combines effective techniques from both the whole language and the phonetic methods. Thus, it includes explicit, systematic instruction in skills such as phonemic awareness and decoding, as well as valuable whole-language experience. As previously noted, decoding is a critical component of the process of learning to read; but the syntactic and contextual knowledge provided by whole-language instruction also helps beginning readers learn important reading skills (Honig, 2001). In fact, studies show that when it comes to reading, "the most effective schools are those that compromise, blending the best of phonics and whole language" (Hancock and Wingert, 1996, p. 75). Furthermore, a survey conducted by Baumann and Hoffman (1998) indicated that the overwhelming majority of elementary reading teachers

"embraced a balanced, eclectic approach to elementary reading instruction, blending phonics and holistic principles and practices" (p. 641). The survey concluded:

> Philosophically, a significant majority of teachers believed in a balanced approach, combining skills with literature and language-rich activities (89%); in an eclectic approach, drawing from multiple perspectives and materials (76%); that phonics should be taught directly so readers become skillful and fluent (63%); and that students need to be immersed in literature and literacy to achieve fluency (71%). (Baumann & Hoffman, 1998, p. 641)

Finally, Baumann and Hoffman's survey found that most teachers believe that students must possess both the skills and motivation to read. Thus, "88% of teachers held the goal of developing readers who were skillful and strategic in word identification, fluency, and comprehension; […] and 94% of teachers held the goal of developing readers who were independent and motivated to choose, appreciate, and enjoy literature" (Baumann & Hoffman, 1998, p. 641).

The Most Effective Method of Teaching Reading: Using a Balanced Model

The ability to read proficiently is a skill that all students must develop in order to succeed in today's culture. Thus, "the goals of any early reading program should be to enable almost every student to comprehend and read fluently grade-appropriate material, understand the meaning of what they have read, be well-read, and enjoy and be able to learn from reading" (Honig, 2001, p. 10). For any student to reach the point where he or she is able to read and understand both trade books and basal textbooks without frequently stumbling over words, most need to be taught about skills such as decoding and phonemic awareness in a explicit, systematic way (Honig, 2001).

However, knowledge of skills alone is not enough to make students enjoy reading. Therefore, based upon thorough research on the definition of reading, reasons for reading importance in contemporary culture, variant models of teaching reading, and case studies and surveys regarding the results of using each educational model to teach reading the balanced method of teaching reading is the most successful method when considering phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension. This approach adequately teaches comprehension, the key to effective reading, by balancing instruction in word identification and meaning. The balanced method encourages educators to develop individualized reading programs that address each student's specific needs. These programs set goals, provide motivation, and keep records for each student (Honig, 2001). By balancing skills instruction and language experience, educators can create a learning environment where "reading failure is preventable" (Honig, 2001, p. 2).

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