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Father of 'Whole Language' Rallying Against Reading-Group Speaker

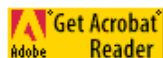
Eric Cooper

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Education Week

Letter to the Editor

March 3, 2004



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I write in response to the March 3, 2004, "Father of 'Whole Language' Rallying Against Reading-Group Speaker" Education Week article. There are many people laboring each day in urban schools across the country who attempt to rescue schoolchildren and youth who are challenged by family and financial circumstances. Personally I do not know of any educator working in challenging circumstances who spends much time engaged in the bickering and polemics surrounding the so-called "reading wars." If truth be told, while some leaders in this country argue about how to teach reading, schoolchildren are failing, are slipping through the widening cracks in the American academic pipeline and, as a consequence, are often losing hope. They cry out to adults, to educators and to communities for leadership and help -- but their voices continue to be drowned out by the cacophony of special interests.

It is in the context of the real-world circumstances of urban education reform that I respond. Please do not read this as slamming the reputations of Kenneth Goodman, who I dearly appreciate for all that he contributes to reading theory and practice, nor that of G. Reid Lyon, who, based on speeches I have heard, remains earnest in his attempts to improve schooling in this country. What I decry is the time lost engaged in these arguments -- no matter how well intentioned.

Based on my experience working in partnership with urban school districts, it is not the reading pedagogy or reading program that makes a difference in the lives of students. What makes a difference is the teacher, i.e., the skills that he or she brings to the classroom which can translate theory into practice, which can integrate high standards, high pedagogy, high content into teaching mediations which accelerate learning for the students. The research is clear that the teacher remains the single most important school-based factor in terms of student achievement -- this line of research can be traced back to, among others, the studies conducted by Chall & Feldman in the 60s. Appropriately building on the effective BASF commercials, "...school-based practitioners do not make the reading programs, we just make them better."

I might add, that a few of us have had the good fortune of being trained by Dorothy Strickland (also mentioned in the above article), during our doctoral studies at Teachers College, Columbia University, where the ideas of 'balanced literacy' methods first emerged for many of us, and where a challenge to maintain an irrefutable belief in the capacity of all students to succeed at the highest levels were formalized. To test the applications of teaching methods and high expectations, all we had to do was walk a few blocks from Columbia to schools in Harlem, NY. Using the broad principles of balanced literacy (a blend of phonics and whole language) along with other methodologies, we were able to break the academic ceiling for inner city children and witnessed achievement gains which went beyond school and community expectations.

Rather than pointing fingers and playing the "gotcha game" related to education reform, can we not forget that in respect to reform, we are primarily talking about the education of children of color who live in poverty. The arguments or discussions between leaders such as Mr. Goodman and Mr. Reid never take hold in communities such as Scarsdale, New York, Shaker Heights, Ohio, Greenwich, Connecticut, Beverly Hills, California, or any other wealthy community in America. Parents in those communities would not stand for it. So why do we continue to tinker with the educational experiences of those most in need?

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