

Anna Beard
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Briefing Document 3

Issue: The New York City “Reading War”—Balanced Literacy versus Phonics

Background/Problem

New York City is in the midst of an ongoing “Reading War.” In 2003, shortly after Mayor Bloomberg entered office with his school Chancellor, Joel Klein, the two mandated that nearly all of the city’s 743 elementary schools adopt an approach to teaching reading titled, “Balanced Literacy”—a pedagogical style that emphasizes exposing children to real books, with little emphasis on the rules of phonics. The announcement of Bloomberg and Klein’s reading mandate meant that most of New York City’s K-6 teachers had to quickly adopt a new style of teaching literacy that was much less structured than what some may call the “drill and kill” (i.e., “Phonics First”) approach to reading pedagogy.¹

Bloomberg and Klein’s reading policy initiative was largely in response to the abysmal performance of city children on state and local ELA/Reading standardized exams. To underscore, at the time the initiative was put forth, only 33.9 percent the city’s rising freshman met or exceeded New York’s ELA standards for the 8th grade. Furthermore, over 25 percent of New York City students were entering high school overage. Therefore, the goal of the Balanced Literacy initiative was to help every child in every classroom in New York meet or exceed state and national literacy standards.²

Today, nearly three years after the reform was instated, hundreds of thousands of New York City school children are learning to read using the Balanced Literacy approach instead of the mix of approaches that were used before Bloomberg and Klein entered office.³ In fact, Chancellor Klein believes that

¹ Kolker, R. “A Is for Apple, B Is for Brawl: Why New York’s Reading Wars are so contentious.” New York Magazine. (May 1, 2006).

² Lam, D., Mei, L., Heaney, P. and Schroeter, A. “Children First: Literacy” (New York City Department of Education). www.nycenet.edu/NR/rdonlyres/1C9D31D4-2EF1-4553-9A38-F8FA5B6A6A0F/1116/LiteracyPresentation_Presented.ppt. (n.d.).

³ Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain an outline the elementary reading curricula used in public elementary schools during the Giuliani administration. The New York City Department of Education was unwilling to provide the information without pre-

Balanced Literacy is the driving force behind the 7 percent increase in fourth grade literacy scores since 2002, just prior to when the new initiative was implemented.⁴

Despite Klein's optimism about Balanced Literacy, a number of critics have emerged pointing out that recent research shows that phonics is the most effective way to teach children how to read, particularly children from low-income families whose parents are less likely to supplement school English lessons with reading basics at home. A recent New York Magazine article points out that to phonics advocates, Whole Language (the philosophy that underpins Balanced Literacy), "is rooted in the worst liberal traditions: It's a freewheeling approach that lacks rigor and standards and could even, some say, be the first step down the slippery slope to abominations like Ebonics."⁵ In defense, proponents of Balanced Literacy argue that phonics-focused curricula take the fun out of reading, and that in the long run they may discourage children from reading at all. The big question that looms is who is correct—advocates of Balanced Literacy or proponents of "Phonics First?"

The Reading War in Context

The Reading War in New York City is far from unique. Disagreements over how one should learn to read have existed for centuries. But, when it comes to the specifics, those that care to enter the debate typically fall into one of two categories 1) those that believe that children should learn phonics first, making the assumption that comprehension and appreciation are a natural outgrowth of accuracy ("Phonics First" proponents)⁶ and 2) those that believe that children should learn to read in an uncontrived manner (i.e., by focusing on meaningful literacy activities with the occasional reference to pre-reading skills, students will learn to not only read, but to love reading) ("Whole Language" proponents).⁷ For example, while most

approval by department committee members—a task that would have extended beyond the due date of this assignment. Regardless, the DOE's response to my inquiry (see Appendix) highlights the contentiousness of the New York City Reading War.

⁴ Kolker, R. (Ibid).

⁵ Kolker, R. (Ibid).

⁶ Wren, S.W. "What Does a 'Balanced Literacy Approach' Mean?" (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory). (n.d.).

⁷ Smith, M.L. Political Spectacle. New York: RoutledgeFalmer. (2004): 151-190.

people in the western tradition between the time of the ancient Greeks up through the mid-1800s learned to read using the Phonics First approach, famous education reformer, Horace Mann, spoke out passionately against such a practice in favor of a whole word approach to teaching basic literacy—an action which prompted many American teachers to shift to the Whole Language approach. Fifty years later phonics came back into style in the U.S. and many children found themselves learning to read using the infamous McGuffey and Beacon readers.⁸ Therefore, as one might predict, for the next 100 years, and through the present, the reading pendulum has continued to swing back in forth.

When did Balanced Literacy enter the picture? A recent National Academy of Sciences report titled, “Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children” aimed to put an end to the Reading Wars forever. The report claimed that its researchers were unbiased and that they used science to promote the best information available about reading and reading pedagogy. Although the report gave specific detailed advice, it was summarized a number of times in the media with simplistic terms that called for a “balanced approach” to reading. Therefore, unfortunately, instead of ending the Reading War, the report essentially perpetuated it because few people could agree on what the term “balanced” meant.⁹

Balanced Literacy—the Case of New York City

Generally speaking, a balanced approach implies mixing both Whole Language and Phonics First techniques together, but how and to what extend is highly up for debate. In the case of New York City, teachers who use the approach usually:

- Provide at least 30 minutes a day for independent reading, where children can use books of their own choosing. Although, teachers usually help children choose books that they can read at about a 95 percent accuracy rate using pictures and context clues.
- Provide at least 30 minutes a day for writing. Children often write their own books.

⁸ Wren, S. (Ibid).

⁹ Wren, S. (Ibid).

- Provide about 20 minutes a day for phonics, spelling and word study instruction.
- Teach children reading and writing strategies. For example, teachers encourage children to predict storylines as they read and in turn confirm or alter their predictions.
- Assess and coach children through regular three to five minute conferences.
- Read aloud to their classes daily.
- Participate in shared reading and writing activities with their students. Teachers and students might alternate reading aloud and/or co-author a story.¹⁰

Positions and Proposed Solutions

Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein are far from alone in terms of those that support keeping Balanced Literacy in New York City's public elementary schools. Professors and education experts at both Teachers College and Bank Street College developed similar approaches to teaching reading even before Balanced Literacy had an official name. In fact, the version of Balanced Literacy that Klein promotes is largely the creation of Lucy Calkins, founder of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project and an expert in Whole Language learning. Furthermore, an approach nearly identical to Calkins' Balanced Literacy is used in a number of the most elite private primary schools in New York's Upper East and Upper West Sides. Therefore, Klein is quick to point out that he has chosen to adopt the literacy practices of the best schools, while letting go of the worst.¹¹

Opponents of Balanced Literacy include President George W. Bush and a number of politicians among the red states, whose opinions have largely been influenced by a 1997 congressionally funded NIH study completed by the National Reading Panel (a committee of academics). The Panel's final report stated that direct instruction of skills, such as phonemic awareness and phonics, is the only proven method

¹⁰ "Balanced Literacy Overview." (New York City Department of Education).
<http://www.nycenet.edu/Offices/TeachLearn/OfficeCurriculumProfessionalDevelopment/DepartmentofLiteracy/BalancedLiteracy/default.htm>. (n.d.).

¹¹ Kolker, R. (Ibid).

of teaching reading. When the study was published it included a list of “evidence-based” programs that emphasize phonics skills. Therefore, after the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, the Bush administration decided to hold back funding from any program not on the National Reading Panel’s list. As some might predict, New York City’s version of Balanced Literacy was not included.

In response to Bush’s act in favor of phonics-based curricula, Klein added a small phonics program called “Passport” to be used along with “Month by Month Phonics” and Balanced Literacy in the city’s public schools—a move which prevented the federal government from taking away \$240 million from the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE).¹² Regardless, Klein’s adoption of more phonics into the curriculum is still not enough to satisfy critics such as Diane Ravitch, former professor of History and Education at Teachers College and current professor at NYU. Since Klein’s adoption of “Passport”, Ravitch has repeatedly accused the NYCDOE for picking phonics texts that have undergone little scientific scrutiny. In addition, she has criticized Klein for imposing a single reading curriculum throughout the vast majority of the city’s elementary schools, pointing out that there are multiple ways to teach and learn subjects.¹³ Therefore, heavy conflict remains and the Reading War saga continues.

Proposed Solutions/Policy Recommendations

Somewhere in between Bush’s proposal that the nation’s elementary schools should focus on phonics-heavy curricula and Klein’s strong advocacy for Calkins’ Balanced Literacy approach, Dr. Sebastian Wren (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory) proposes a slightly different path. He writes, “The most troubling aspect of the debate over Phonics, Whole Language and balanced approaches to reading instruction is the interest and debate almost always focuses on the lessons and activities a teacher should deliver.”¹⁴ Wren criticizes teachers in both camps for planning their reading lessons

¹² Kolker, R. (Ibid).

¹³ “A Dissenting Voice: Diane Ravitch Talks About NYC’s Newest School Reforms.” (Teachers College). <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/news/article.htm?id=4281&tid=113>. (February 1, 2003).

¹⁴ Wren, S. (Ibid).

meticulously weeks before they are actually taught. He adds, “Lesson plans can be thought out in broad strokes in advance, but if instruction is to be truly effective, lesson plans need to be constantly revised to accommodate new assessment information, and lessons need to suit the learning needs of individual students.” Wren advocates that researchers and educators work hard to develop strategies for teachers to better assess and tailor their teaching to students on the spot.

While I agree with Wren that it is always helpful for teachers to know how to better assess their students and work with individual needs, his advice is easier said than done. Having taught English to elementary school students in Japan using a phonics-centered approach, I found it difficult to tailor my lessons to ten individuals within the span of a short one-hour lesson, given that I was required to cover a set amount of material each class. Therefore, I imagine it to be exceedingly difficult for public school teachers in New York City to tailor reading lessons to classrooms of 35 children, particularly in classes that include a mixed of native and secondary English speakers.

Perhaps the best way to tailor reading and writing lessons to individual students is to find ways in which teachers can focus on smaller numbers of students at one time. For example, studies have shown that peer tutoring (tutoring in which older students help younger students learn to read), combined peer-adult tutoring and computer-assisted instruction are cost-effective ways to improve student reading achievement.¹⁵ If schools were to try some of the aforementioned initiatives, teachers and tutors alike would have more time to assess and help struggling students learn to read.

In addition, although phonics-focused curricula have the reputation of being the “drill and kill” approach to reading, there are ways in which phonics lessons can be made fun. The phonics curriculum I used in Japan was highly interactive. I planned each lesson so that students spent almost 100 percent of their time playing active educational phonics and reading “games”—a tactic that proved very successful in

¹⁵ Levin, H.M., Glass, G.V. and Meister, G.R. “Cost Effectiveness of Computer-Assisted Instruction.” Evaluation Review. 11(1). (February 1987).

terms of helping my kids learn materials quickly and pass regular standardized exams. Perhaps if teachers spent a little more time developing phonics activities that give students an opportunity to move, sing, play games and dance (as opposed to desk work), they would find that their students who need more help with the “basics,” not only learn to read faster, but that they cultivate a love of language as well.

Given that New York City’s elite elementary schools are using Balanced Literacy with wide success, it seems reasonable to promote the curriculum in other public schools. In terms of ejecting elements of phonics into the program, I recommend that the NYCDOE find phonics curricula that are not only effective (particularly for “disadvantaged” youth), but fun as well. If such programs do not exist in the U.S., perhaps it is time for members of the NYCDOE to take a trip to Japan, where phonics is actually fun!