



A Back-To-Balance Approach

By Mary Anne Duggan

Ending the 'Phonics versus Whole Language' Debate

Balance is a positive term (balanced diet, balanced lifestyle). Balance is where we land after swinging from one end of the pendulum to the other.

In the last several decades, the reading pendulum has been working overtime, swinging from teaching reading through a whole language approach to the use of a phonics-based system. After a bitter battle in the media and political and religious arenas, many educators and parents are relieved to see the pendulum losing momentum and finding rest in the middle ground.

Veteran teacher trainer Diane Murphy has witnessed the reading wars over the last decade, especially when educators began talking about "whole language" or "balanced reading." "Most parents didn't experience these approaches when they were in school," Murphy says. "Without a knowledge base, people get confused and find it easier to embrace a more familiar way of learning how to read. Add to that the media's current infatuation with the word 'phonics,' and misinformation becomes widespread."

Whole language, although difficult to define, means instruction that emphasizes reading for meaning, the use of children's literature as opposed to textbooks, early writing, projects arising from students' interests, and the teaching of skills while reading real books.

Phonics-based instruction emphasizes letter-sound relationships and patterns. A pure phonics approach often involves textbooks, teacher-directed lessons, and lots of drill and practice.

Phonics proponents see language as an artificially constructed code, one that is not learned naturally. Rather than joining a particular camp, successful teachers across the country are removing labels such as "whole language" and "phonics"

in the teaching of reading. They are rising above the battlefield, opting instead for a balanced approach in the best interest of their students. Actually, good teachers have always taught this way.

The cry for balance is echoed in the works of education professionals such as Marie Carbo, Founder and Executive Director of the National Reading Styles Institute. Carbo originated reading styles – the idea that children show a preference for either phonics-based or whole language instruction. "Instead of saying 'What's wrong' with the child who is struggling with reading, it's better to look at what's wrong with the program," says Juliet DiTroia of the National Reading Styles Institute. "We want children to be successful. It's a shame when a teacher has to try 10 methods of teaching reading before figuring out what works with a child."

According to Reading Styles theory, children who think more globally tend to prefer whole language instruction. They can recall words from stories and writing helps them learn to read. Children who prefer phonics, on the other hand, are often more analytical and auditory. Auditory children can hear and remember sounds. They find the logic of phonics appealing.

An estimated 20 percent of students will have difficulty with phonological awareness (knowing letter sounds and how to blend them). In addition, students are becoming more aliterate, meaning they can read, but they don't want to.

Offering a balanced program is the only way to reach each student. The bottom line: All children need to be exposed to great literature and all children can benefit from phonics instruction.



Using computer programs wisely

A computer is a marvelous tool, and there are things parents can do to help their children use it even more effectively.

Sit down with your child and go through a new program together. "Parents need to be there with the children otherwise they'll have frustrated kids," advises Bayer. "The children need to understand how to work the program and follow the instructions." Our children may be computer-smart, but

they may not be aware of all the activities a program has to offer, or how to go from one to another.

Choose software which is appropriate for your child. Finding the right combination of graphics, animation, and pacing – not to mention humor – can turn a reading program into one of your child's favorite "games." To match a program to your child, try an online program preview at the Knowledge Adventure web site.

In addition to the atmosphere of the program, there may be various skills stressed and a range of activities to present those skills, some of which may appeal more to some youngsters than others. Read the software descriptions carefully. Usually you'll find enough detailed information and clues to determine if it's a good fit for your child.

Select a program with variety in the presentation and level of skills being taught. You don't want your youngster to fly