

Life in the Radical Middle:
A Personal Apology for a Balanced View of Reading
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Most days, I think I have adjusted to my role as a member of the radical middle in the debates and discussions of reading theory and practice (Pearson, 1996). I am pretty sure that I am somewhere in the middle because colleagues in neither the whole language nor the new phonics crowd seem to accept my position. In the 1980s, when whole language ideas about literacy instruction were on the rise, I was often constructed by others as a cognitive behaviorist, a skills monger masquerading as a champion of comprehension and schema theory. More recently, with the political ascendancy of what I call the new phonics—a term I use to characterize what I see as a combined emphasis on phonemic awareness, explicit synthetic phonics instruction, and decodable text—I have been reconstructed by some as a “whole language advocate”—a characterization that will no doubt bring a smirk to the lips of respectable whole language folks and a bewildered expression to the countenance of close colleagues and students. Not that there is anything wrong with either position—but neither really fits me well. I am also pretty sure that I am *radical* about being there, in the middle. In fact, as the debates go on, ad infinitum, and as the research evidence in favor of centrist positions on curricular and instructional issues piles up, I get more radical every day. Instead, I am someone who has great respect for a middle ground, and I believe that most of my well-known work and most of the roles I have played in the field belie this preference. As the most convincing evidence of this middle ground, I would point to my editorial role. First as a coeditor of *Reading Research Quarterly* and then as coeditor of the now *three Handbooks of Reading Research*, I have tried to promote paradigmatic tolerance and respect—not always with resounding success, but always with conviction. Even in my less savory role as a basal author (just short, in the eyes of some, of being a demon), my goal was to make sure that *reading* research was given as much play as *market* research and that literature and integrated curriculum were as prominent as skills and strategies.

Sometimes, however, I find myself resenting the implication, more often left unsaid than proudly asserted, that those who occupy the middle of intellectual controversies are just too wishy-washy to stand for something of substance. If I am completely honest, I usually realize that I am the one who attributes—to those who live at the extremes—the accusation that middle grounders are without conviction. And that realization causes me to wonder how deep my convictions really are. This was just such a mood of self doubt that swept over me when I sat down to write this personal essay about my views of reading theory and practice. Not surprisingly then, I chose to construct this piece as an apology, an attempt to provide readers (including myself) with as thorough an account as I could muster of why I live in the radical middle.

Let me begin by explaining what I think it means to say I am a member of the radical middle and then provide the apology. These are the premises, the basic tenets, the fundamental beliefs about reading that prompt me to accept that label.

1. I subscribe to an interactive model of the reading process. That model’s fundamental principle is the relationships among reader, text, and context are constantly shifting. Sometimes we reach out to the text, grabbing whatever meaning we can before the text has a chance to fully assert its own. Sometimes, we sit back and let the text, and its meaning come to us. We call the first top-down, inside-out, or hypothesis-driven reading because the reader dominates. We call the second bottom-up, outside-in, or text-driven

because the text dominates. Sometimes particular purposes, such as updating knowledge when we read the newspaper or trying to get an author's argument straight determine the stance we take. In my interactive view, whatever we are and whatever we do as readers changes day by day, hour by hour, and moment by moment.

2. I accept the research suggesting that the most skilled readers are those who have both well-honed automatic word identification processes and rich stores of knowledge that they use to construct, monitor, and refine the models of meaning they construct as they read. This view is consistent with the fact that I believe both the miscue research of Goodman and his colleagues (see, for example, Goodman, 1967), which suggests that good readers are more likely to make meaning preserving miscues, AND the eye-movement research reviewed by Adams (1990), which suggests that instead of sampling text to confirm hypotheses, good readers attend to each and every part of each and every word. Here is my way of reconciling those seemingly contradictory views: When readers are in an automatic processing mode, they just move along, recoding everything in sight to a phonological code that can be processed in working memory. BUT when the going gets tough (as it often does when miscues are more frequent), good readers shift to a conscious-control mode and use every conceivable resource, including context and meaning, to make sense of things. Thus good readers are both *more* skillful at using context and *less* reliant on it for basic word identification tasks.
3. I believe that reading occurs as a fundamentally individual process, with eyes on print, consumed by the goal of creating a satisfactory model of meaning that fits both the facts of the text and the facts that a reader brings to the reading. But reading is also fundamentally a social process, readily influenced by a wide range of social and cultural factors. In the most obvious social sense, we change our minds about what a text means when we discuss it with others. At a more subtle level, we engage in a conversation with an unknown author when we read her text. Even more distant, the same cultural forces, some of them handed down over several generations within a community or a culture, that shape our values and our behavior also shape our reading.
4. I subscribe to the view that reading is the whole point of reading instruction (and, by the way, that writing is whole point of writing instruction). Thus a curriculum that postpones real reading for more than an instant does kids a disservice by raising in their minds the possibility that reading may not be the point of reading instruction.
5. I believe that skills are essential features of both reading and reading instruction. It would be nice, wonderful in fact, if all kids acquired the skills and strategies they need to be successful independent readers and writers without explicit instruction or any other form of arduous effort on the part of teachers. However both research (see Pearson, 1996; McIntyre & Pressley, 1996) and the experience of teachers suggests that students benefit from the modeling, scaffolding, and guidance that teachers can provide.
6. I believe skills and skill instruction should always be regarded as means to an end rather than ends unto themselves. The point of any skill instruction, be it phonics, vocabulary, or comprehension, is that students can understand, appreciate, and critique what they read; in fact, the ultimate test of the efficacy of any skill instruction is not whether students can perform the skill as it was taught but whether it improves their understanding and, ultimately, their knowledge base. In a sense, the job of phonics is not completed until a reader finds joy, inspiration, knowledge, or fault in a text.

7. I believe that reading and writing are synergistic processes—what we learn in doing the one benefits the other. And this synergy can be seen in all aspects the processes, from the level of phoneme-grapheme relations (e.g., invented spelling activities benefiting reading phonics) to genre like features of text (e.g., reading stories to get ideas for how to structure one's own).

Given these fundamental tenets, my position in the radical middle should be at least a little more transparent; equally transparent should be some of the internal contradictions I live with: top-down and bottom-up, text and reader, individual and social, reading and writing, and equal respect for both authentic activity and explicit skills instruction. But I have told you only what I think it means to occupy the position I do, not why I embrace these beliefs. Here is the why.

Sometimes I think that I have a personal attraction to contradiction and dialectic tension. I sometimes say to myself, “Maybe you just enjoy theoretical inconsistency and internal contradictions; perhaps they are your concession to post-modernism.” But reading theory and practice are not the only intellectual arenas in which I find myself attracted to embracing what others see as binary opposites. In educational research more generally, I find the debate about qualitative versus quantitative research about as compelling as the new phonics/whole language debate. I cannot imagine why any field of inquiry would want to limit itself to a single set of tools and practices. Even though I find both debates interesting and professionally useful, I fear the ultimate outcome of both, if they continue unbridled by saner heads, will be victory for one side or another. That, in my view, would be a disastrous outcome, either for reading pedagogy or educational research. A more flattering way to express this same position is to say that I have always aspired to the Greek ideal of moderation in all things or to the oriental notion that every idea entails its opposite. Neither statement would be untrue, but either would fail capture the enchantment I experience in embracing contradiction.

A second reason for living in the radical middle is the research base supporting it. I read the research implicating authentic reading and writing and find it compelling. I read the research supporting explicit skill instruction and find it equally as compelling. What occurs to me, then, is that there must be a higher order level of analysis in which both of these lines of inquiry can be reconciled. That would be a level in which authentic activity and ambitious instruction were viewed as complements rather than alternatives to one another. The radical middle, with its (or rather my) fascination with apparent contradiction, allows me to work comfortably at that level. It is, most likely, exactly this disposition that allowed me, as a member of the panel upon which this entire consensus project was based, to find so much to agree with in the statements that emerged as potential candidates for consensus in each iteration of the consensus process (see Flippo, Chapter 1 in this volume).

Third on my list is the wisdom of practice as I have come to understand it by interacting with scores of classroom teachers. As the new phonics/whole language debate has played itself out in the last few years, I have found the reaction of classroom teachers particularly insightful. The debate rages in the public press, in statehouses, and in academic venues; by contrast, my impressions from talking to teachers about the debate is that they find it fairly unproductive. They tend toward an enlightened eclecticism when it comes to matters of practice. So they see no contradiction in embracing an authentic writing activity in the same breath as a new approach to teaching conventional grammar. Some teachers can readily adopt a program that emphasizes explicit phonics instruction and demand that their students engage in at least 40 minutes per day

of authentic reading. Thus, even though the consensus statements in Chapter 1 represent a display of “eclecticism” from experts who represent very different views of reading contexts and practices, classroom teachers who embrace this eclectic stance probably find many, if not most, of them reasonable and helpful. I would probably side with them.

Those who aspire to theoretical consistency find this sort of eclecticism disturbing because they see it as a disconnect between theory and practice. But I find this negative connotation for eclectic positions surprising given the traditional denotation of the word. The dictionary definition of eclectic is, “selecting or choosing from among various sources.” An eclectic stance implies agency (making a selection) and an implicit set of criteria (to make the selection) on the part of the agent. It is exactly this intentionality that I have observed in teachers' eclecticism. My hunch is student engagement (will this appeal to my students?) and perceived helpfulness (will it help them better do their job as readers?) are the two criteria teachers use in deciding whether to incorporate a new practice into their teaching repertoire. It is only fair to confess that I have always taken a decidedly eclectic stance toward my own teaching, both as an elementary classroom teacher and a college instructor.

Fourth is the modest view of evidence that I hold for the positions we advocate in education. While I think we have learned a great deal in the past 30 years about the nature and development of the reading process and even more about instructional practices that promote individual growth in reading (for an account of what I think we have learned, see my review of the Snow, Burns, and Griffith 1998 report published by the National Academy of Science, *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*—Pearson, 1999), I think we can do better. I think there is still room for more evidence and better methods of inquiry. Whatever the reasons, I cannot rid myself of nagging doubts about the strength and quality of our current evidence. And any time one's confidence is shaky, then dispositions of tolerance (for ideas, practices, and research methods) and inquiry (let's try it out and see what happens) make sense to me.

Fifth, the radical middle provides a nice home for the particular approach to curricular balance that I have been moving toward. The metaphor of the fulcrum of the scales of justice has never particularly appealed to me because it suggests that we are carving out a political balance—balancing off one element from the new phonics with one from whole language, and so on. But there is another, more powerful metaphor in the “balance of nature.” In this ecological approach, balance is not a matter of evening the score; instead it is a matter of assembling an array of skills, strategies, processes, and practices that are sufficiently rich and synergistic to guarantee a full and rich curriculum for all students (one that, incidentally, would honor tenets 4–7 in my list of tenets).

So there you have it—my apology for being a member of the radical middle. As I said, it is sometimes a difficult position to maintain. There are those who wonder whether those of us who occupy this middle ground have any standards at all. And there are many ideological bulldozers lurking nearby, ready to forcibly remove you from your newly gained intellectual ground. But it is a satisfying ground to hold. And it offers, unfortunately, all too clear a view of the constant, regular, and periodic swing of the curricular pendulum.

References

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