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TEACHERS

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Who Teaches the Teachers?

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With its pictures of earnest schoolchildren busily learning, Regie Routman's book doesn't look dangerous. But like many textbooks used in colleges of education, *Invitations: Changing as Teachers and Learners K-12* (Heinemann, 1994) may be keeping thousands of children from mastering basic academic skills. Future teachers learn from Routman, for example, that entirely too much attention has been paid to phonics, with the result that "some children have difficulty learning to read." In fact, research has repeatedly shown almost the opposite: Attending to phonics is important to *preventing* reading difficulties.

Invitations, one of the most widely used textbooks in ed schools (it's at Vanderbilt, Michigan State, and the University of Arizona, to name a few), illustrates why efforts to improve American education are so often frustrated. Even when evidence about effective teaching abounds, education colleges tend to ignore it, and future teachers don't learn about it. This is true even in states committed to methods shown by research to be effective. Since 1997, for example, Massachusetts has had reading standards that call for the formal teaching of letter-sound relationships. Yet at Lesley College, which prepares more teachers than any other institution in the commonwealth, education students are still learning

from *Invitations* that phonics instruction is useless or even a “handicap.” Since 1996, California has had a law requiring that future teachers be instructed in “systematic, explicit phonics.” Yet education professors at many California institutions (including California State University campuses) are still assigning Routman.

Short on evidence, Routman’s book is long on anecdotes—which ed schools have lately been claiming constitute a special qualitative “research,” far more useful to teachers than the old-fashioned quantitative kind. Routman presents the case of Maria, a teacher so frustrated that “she often ended the day in tears.” The problem is that Maria, who herself had a traditional education, feels obliged to pass on to her students information about such matters as grammar and punctuation. “But,” Routman reports, “no matter how hard she tried, things didn’t seem to come together for her.” Fortunately, Maria attends a summer workshop that shows her the error of her ways and the wisdom of “whole language,” an approach based on the idea that children will naturally evolve into readers (and spellers and punctuators) if only adults will get out of the way. With this enlightenment, Maria becomes a teacher who “can offer children choices in decision making about their own learning.” Her classroom, freed from focusing on dull matters like capitalization, is a “joyful, collaborative community.”

Lest any reader miss the message, Routman also reports on Loretta, a second-grade teacher who has a similar conversion. Her eyes are opened to what she really wants to do (which includes “abandoning spelling workbooks and phonics pages”) by a week-long conference called “Creating the Whole Language Classroom.” As a result of her enlightenment, Loretta now presides over “a child-centered room in which children are productively in charge of their own learning.” Once struggling and frustrated, she is now “a relaxed teacher clearly enjoying herself.”

For all the psychic rewards it brings, the conversion that Routman is urging on teachers can apparently be wrenching. Routman quotes a kindergarten teacher who decided to let her students discover phonics for themselves. “I felt real guilty for a long time,” she says. A first-grade teacher reports feeling pressured by second-grade teachers who expect kids to arrive in their classrooms knowing phonics: “Also, I feel guilty for not giving spelling tests.” Routman, an elementary school teacher in Ohio, notes that she herself has had difficulties abandoning the explicit teaching of phonics. “It has taken me well over ten years to feel completely comfortable with this approach.”

A sensible reaction to all this guilt would be to explore whether there's some justification for it. Are whole-language teachers perhaps aware, at least at a subliminal level, of the extensive research showing that a knowledge of spelling-sound correspondences and common spelling conventions is important to becoming a proficient reader? Indeed, this finding has been so well publicized, most recently in a report from the National Research Council entitled *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*, that it would be hard for them to miss. The American Federation of Teachers has highlighted the research supporting explicit, systematic phonics instruction. The National Education Association recently helped sponsor a project that looked for programs of proven effectiveness and found two for elementary schools—Direct Instruction and Success for All—both strongly based in phonics.

But rather than exploring the sources of whole-language teachers' anxiety, Routman recommends support groups to diminish it. In these groups, like-minded souls offer encouragement to one another and discuss such matters as how to handle parental discontent. One of the support groups she attends, Routman reports, also lobbies against standardized tests in early grades, a campaign that if successful will allow teachers to decide for themselves whether their methods are working. Such a process would be more "meaningful," Routman claims, though it would, of course, leave parents without a clue about how their children are doing in comparison with others.

Routman maintains that her purpose in writing is to help other teachers develop their personal philosophies of teaching. But her book, although it is 758 pages long, doesn't contain information that teachers need to develop a truly informed view. Routman repeatedly mentions whole-language gurus like Kenneth Goodman (who says that phonics-based reading instruction represents a "flat-earth view of the world") and Frank Smith (who says that the ability to read and write is overvalued: "Literacy doesn't make anyone a better person"), but she entirely neglects both Jeanne Chall and Marilyn Adams, authors of landmark studies synthesizing decades of research and making it perfectly clear that reading programs should include systematic and explicit phonics instruction.

Routman is hardly alone in advocating independence for teachers while effectively restricting their choices. *Creating Classrooms for Authors and Inquirers* by Kathy G. Short and Jerome C. Harste with Carolyn Burke (Heinemann, 1996) begins by approvingly describing teachers who "develop their own personal theories of reading and writing" but

by page nine has made clear that the only valid theories anyone could possibly develop are whole-language ones.

Similarly, although Short and Harste repeatedly state that children's agendas should drive the classroom, they are also adamant that students sometimes profess goals—such as wanting to spell correctly—of which teachers must be wary. When one of their students, third-grader Maria, writes that she wants to “learn how to spell,” she is carefully observed until the authors are sure she does not suffer from “an overconcern with spelling.” Even then she gets not a spelling book, but “lessons on strategies,” such as “discussing possible spellings with peers.” Short and Harste refer future teachers who want more information to J. Richard Gentry's *Spel . . . Is a Four-Letter Word* (Heinemann, 1987), a book that views “good spelling” as “merely a convenience.” Writes Gentry, “There are some people like secretaries, who need to be accurate, but usually even they can use a word processor with a good spelling check.” Confessing to being a bad speller himself, Gentry helpfully advises students to “make an honest attempt to spell werds wright.”

The Short and Harste book dominates elementary education instruction at Indiana University's School of Education, the third largest ed school in the country and the place where Harste teaches. The fact that Harste is president-elect of the National Council of Teachers of English lends added significance to *Creating Classrooms*. The ideas in it are those that the council, an organization some 90,000 strong, promotes through its publications, conferences, and conventions. Future teachers who learn from *Creating Classrooms* that it is a mistake for the curriculum to be “mandated by ‘experts’ outside the classroom” are getting something close to the official doctrine of their profession—as well as a rationale for ignoring standards set by states to establish what students should know and be able to do at various stages in their education.

The very idea that there are certain facts that kids should know is, according to *Creating Classrooms*, symptomatic of an antiquated way of thinking. In the updated, postmodern world, people (or at least professors) know that there are no such things as facts. There are only “perspectives,” and the proper job of a teacher is to help students develop them. One way to do this, Short and Harste advise, is to ask students “to find a ‘fact’ that is not true from the perspective of another knowledge system.” This is, of course, postmodern nonsense. A fact is not a fact if it is not true. It is an error, no matter one's perspective.

Short and Harste sow further confusion when they write about research. They inform their readers:

Recently, there has been a new shift. Instead of seeing research as objective and language as value free, researchers are now realizing how subjective the whole process is. . . . The only thing research can do is help a learner or a community of learners interrogate their values.

The fact that total objectivity is impossible does not mean that we are condemned to explaining everything subjectively. Striving for objectivity, as scientists around the world can testify, yields important results. While research in the social sciences is often less exact than research in the hard sciences, it still produces important information, particularly when data converge, as they do in the case of reading.

But how are future teachers to know any of this? They leave Short and Harste and head for elementary classrooms uninformed about the findings of several decades of scientific research on reading instruction and, in any case, encouraged to regard such research as meaningless.

Lest future teachers ever be tempted to think reliable, replicable research has significance, Western Michigan University professor Constance Weaver in *Reading Process and Practice* (Heinemann, 1994) paints a picture of the distasteful types they would be aligning themselves with: members of the Far Right, driven not by the wish to teach children to read, but by “the desire to promote a religious agenda and/or to maintain the socioeconomic status quo.” According to Weaver, who directed the Commission on Reading for the National Council of Teachers of English in the late 1980s, right-wing extremists believe that kids who study phonics will get “the words ‘right’” and thus read what the Bible actually says rather than approximate its meaning. Moreover, she writes, “Teaching intensive phonics . . . is also a way of keeping children’s attention on doing what they’re told and keeping them from reading or thinking for themselves.”

Nor, in Weaver’s view, is it just their own children that phonics-obsessed right-wingers want to oppress. “The political Far Right’s agenda is well-served,” she writes, “by promoting docility and obedience—on the part of the lower classes.” Ultraconservatives advocate phonics teaching because it is authoritarian, she says, and serves to socialize “nonmainstream students, especially those in so-called lower ability groups or tracks . . . into subordinate roles.”

Weaver neglects to mention that the phonics cause has advocates who are not Republicans, much less conservatives. One of the standard-bearers in California, for example, is Marion Joseph, a longtime Democrat, who took up the battle against whole language when one of her grandchildren was expected to figure out reading for himself. In the California legislature, Democrats as well as Republicans have enthusiastically backed pro-phonics bills.

But facts haven't stood in the way of ed school professors claiming a political plot of the very worst kind is afoot. A recent president of the National Council of Teachers of English, infuriated with policymakers who insist that government ought to fund only "reliable, scientific" educational research, linked his opponents not only to the red-baiters of the fifties but to advocates of "slavery, racism, genocide, the incarceration of dissidents in mental hospitals, and a host of other injustices."

California State University, which prepares more than half that state's teachers, is one of the institutions at which Weaver's *Reading Process and Practice* is used. Last year, the academic senate there condemned the state's requirement that ed schools teach phonics as a threat to academic freedom. Apparently convinced that he and his colleagues have a right to fill future teachers with anti-scientific claptrap, one Cal State professor told the *Los Angeles Times*, "What we have in the state right now is McCarthyism."

But, as the textbooks used in many ed schools clearly show, what we really have all across the county is a situation inimical to making classrooms function more effectively. Colleges of education, long criticized for teaching trivia, are now doing something much worse: sabotaging the best efforts of reformers to get schools to use methods that work.