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UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

In the Spotlight

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Education News - April 15, 1998**The Bottom Line on Reading Programs:****Most Work Some of the Time, with Some Students**

by Paula Moore

Debate continues to rage in academic and research circles over beginning reading instruction. The controversies are heated and politically charged. Now, the so-called Reading War is boiling over into the popular press and stirring up unnecessary fears among parents and community members that schools and teachers may not be using the "best" method to teach reading. In Maine, reports about the Reading War are turning up with regularity in local newspapers and on radio talk shows and statewide newscasts.

However, Maine children consistently outperform their peers in other states on national tests of reading proficiency. Reading and writing scores on the Maine Educational Assessment have been steadily improving. A 1994-95 state assessment of Maine children's reading achievement at the beginning and end of first grade indicated that even at the beginning of schooling, most Maine youngsters are doing extremely well in reading and writing achievement. Therefore, I urge caution and calm when people hear reports about the Reading War in Maine classrooms. Here are some facts to consider:

- Seventy-80 percent of the children in Maine schools are going to do just fine learning to read, regardless of the form of reading instruction used in the school. Research indicates that typical youngsters learn what is needed to read and write from any instructional program, even when key elements are left out.
- Most instructional programs are biased in some way. That is, they emphasize some key reading skills by spending more time on them, and de-emphasize other skills by allocating less instructional time to them.

For example, phonics-based programs spend more instructional time on decoding letter sounds while giving students less time to read for meaning. Meaning-based programs allocate more time to comprehension skills while giving less time to phonics skills. However, students vary in ability, experience and personality. Consequently, the biases of instructional programs will give some students an advantage and be a disadvantage to others. Schools need a menu of methods, materials and programs to choose from in order to match instruction to the varying needs of students.

- Twenty - 30 percent of the children may have difficulty learning in any reading program, even the most balanced program which allocate equal instructional time to phonics and to reading for meaning. The reasons that children fail to make progress in reading are many and varied. For example, they may have health, emotional or behavioral problems,

miss too many days of school, or lack experience with books and writing before they enter school.

- Experience with reading and writing in the pre-school years is critical. Research indicates that some children enter school having had between 1,000-1,700 hours of storybook reading, 1,000 hours of watching *Sesame Street* with caregivers and 1,000 hours playing word and computer games. They are primed to take advantage of classroom reading instruction.

Other children enter school with as few as 25 hours of storybook reading and less than 200 hours of word play and other literacy-related experiences. Many of these children do not catch up on missed pre-reading experiences without extra instructional time that is geared to their individual needs, regardless of the quality of the classroom reading instruction.

- The teacher, not the instructional method, makes the difference. In more than 30 years of research to identify the best method for reading instruction, the variable often associated with reading achievement is the teacher. In other words, particular instructional methods resulted in achievement for some groups, but not for others. The research concluded that it is the teachers who make the difference in achievement. Teachers teach students; programs and methods are just the tools used by teachers. Schools and communities would be well advised to invest in professional development for teachers, rather than in costly and time-consuming debates about instructional methods.
- Reading programs for special populations of students do not work for a general population of students in a classroom setting. There is a great deal of interest in reading programs which were designed for students having difficulty learning. For example, two programs generating interest in Maine schools are the Reading Recovery Program, designed as a short-term intervention for first graders at-risk for reading difficulties, and the Wilson Program, being marketed for use with special education students. Because these reading programs appear to work well with the populations for which they were designed, some educators, journalists and school board members have concluded that classroom teachers should use them with all children. This is flawed thinking.

The theory and research behind programs such as Reading Recovery and the Wilson Program are narrow and apply only to the specific population of children having learning difficulties. Instruction suitable for the classroom situation must have a broader base of theory and research.

- Watch out for extremist positions and view their messages with a critical eye. There are extremists at one end of the debate who completely ignore or deny the sizable research evidence about the positive effects of phonics instruction. At the other end are extremists who imply that virtually all reading problems will be eliminated by teaching intense phonics or that all children should have the same form and intensity of phonics instruction. In fact, there is no research to support either of these extreme positions.

The bottom line is that most instructional programs work some of the time, with some of the students. Schools and teachers need to know which programs work best for which students and under which conditions.

Instead of pitting programs and their proponents against each other, let's put our educational dollars and efforts into ensuring that Maine schools and teachers have all the reading programs necessary to meet the many and varied needs of the children they serve.

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