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Deborah Smith
Saginaw Valley State University

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On the Shoulders of giants: Leaders in the field of literacy as Teacher Advocates

Deborah Smith
Saginaw Valley State University

Increased scrutiny of public education has many people debating the way in which reading and writing should be taught. The reasons behind poor reading and writing skills are complex and individual. The agony of not being able to read or write is intricately entwined with feelings of self-worth and motivation in school; poor reading and writing skills can hinder students' confidence in every class. "As local educational practices come to resonate more closely with prevailing knowledge about exemplary reading [and writing] instruction, our national literacy picture will brighten" (Henk et al., 2000, p. 368). In order to lead us to this brighter future, today's teachers need to understand the theories behind their classroom literacy practices. The leaders in the field provide the foundations for innovative literacy programs and advocate for teachers control of their curriculum to guide education into the twenty-first century.

Many prominent thinkers have shaped our understanding of how children learn and what constitutes best practice in the field of literacy instruction. These leaders advocate for teachers in a multitude of ways. Their research suppositions advocate for teachers in that they show literacy to be complex and individual and students' literacy needs to be best met by knowledgeable, flexible teachers who understand that no one approach will work for all students. Many of these leaders in literacy education advocate directly for teachers' autonomy in their classrooms. Their findings can also help teachers to be their own advocates. Knowledge of the research that supports instructional decision-making will prepare teachers who must respond to questions concerning literacy instruction. In times when teachers' decisions are being scrutinized, it becomes even more important to verse ourselves

in the research findings so that we can continue to advocate for the individual child in an age where over-standardization is making that much more difficult. Teacher advocacy is necessary to provide the best literacy instruction possible, and it is possible with the help of the leaders in the field of literacy education.

Leaders in Literacy Education

Frank Smith is a trailblazer whose research has explored the basic nature of reading and of learning to read. He is also a vocal advocate for teachers. His advice is clear and direct, "make learning to read easy— which means making reading a meaningful, enjoyable, and frequent experience for children" (Smith, 1997, p. 56). He is also a proponent of empowering teachers, asserting that teachers need to have real, decision-making authority and not be constrained by prepackaged programs. Smith (1997) maintains that teachers must "protect themselves and their students from the effects of programs and tests, which can persuade learners that reading is nonsensical, painful, and pointless instead of satisfying, useful, and often joyful" (p. 130). His findings support the tenet that reading is a complex process and no one method of presentation or assessment will work for all students; reading instruction must be individualized.

Smith disagrees with researchers who advance phonics or any other prepackaged method as viable methods for reading instruction. "To expect readers, especially beginners, to learn and rely upon phonics is to distract them with involved and unreliable procedures that are largely unnecessary" (Smith, 1997, p. 42). He cites the complexity of the sound system for the English alphabet and the preponderance of rules and exceptions students would have to memorize to account for the variety of sounds as his basis. Smith (1997) also agrees with Richard Allington that labeling students is simply inventing "terms that are used to conceal ignorance about why some children fail to learn to read" (p. 6) and that reading is not a function of intellectual ability. Both Smith and Allington advocate for teachers' individual instruction and guidance in

helping students make connections to texts and inspire a love of reading.

Richard Allington is a leader in researching the design and delivery of reading instruction for students who have difficulties with reading. One area that Allington's research addresses is the practice of ability grouping in elementary schools. Allington (1995) believes that ability grouping is an instructional strategy that should be put behind us. He posits that these groups are based on students' prior experience with text and function to "predict future educational outcomes with alarming accuracy" (Allington, 1995, p. 2). Allington contends that most students can become literate along with their peers but that ability grouping lowers expectations and opportunities for some children to learn to read. He advocates for teachers' expert differentiation in instruction as the best way to teach children to read.

Allington (1998) suggests that reading acquisition varies because it is difficult for some children and relatively easy for others. "Because children vary in the ease with which they acquire literacy and because they arrive at school with varied levels of literary experience, we should expect that providing a standard instructional program would result in large discrepancies in achievement" (Allington, 1998, p.2). Unlike the previous views of literacy development this view promotes the belief that virtually all children can become readers. Allington believes that this professional belief is the first step in teaching all children to read and write, and that teachers must be the advocates who make this happen for children.

Patricia Cunningham is another forerunner in the field of reading education who collaborates with Richard Allington and shares many of his views. She agrees that ability grouping is detrimental to those students in the lowest group and that the instruction they receive is markedly different. Cunningham and Allington (1999) note that "children who are going to become literate must be in classrooms in which authentic reading and writing are central activities that pervade the school day and the curriculum" (p. xiv). To achieve this Cunningham suggests a multilevel, multimethod balanced literacy framework be used in place of ability groups. This plan is

called the Four Blocks Framework and it includes these components: the guided reading block, the self-selected reading block, the writing block, and the words block (Cunningham, 1999). Many of the suggestions and activities that Cunningham makes easy to implement are based upon the foundational achievements of other educators. One of the cornerstones of her work is that a teacher should foster extensive reading and that students should be allowed a choice in their reading materials.

Stephen Krashen has devoted much of his research to expanding our understanding of independent reading and the benefits of choice for students in a reading program. Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) has been defined as time set aside to allow students to read what they want to read (Krashen, 1993). There exists a large amount of evidence to suggest that Free Voluntary Reading is a more beneficial way for teachers and parents to promote literacy and language development than traditional instruction (Krashen, 1993). One possible explanation is the complexity argument. Krashen (1982) states that "language is simply too complex to describe, teach and consciously learn... The complexity argument for vocabulary is the size argument: There are simply too many words to acquire" (p. 345). These and other studies support the growing trend towards incorporating independent reading where students choose their own books into the school day. The more students read the better they get at reading; it is a simple concept but one that is too often overlooked in reading instruction. Krashen and others continue to study the benefits of increased reading for students at all grade levels and advocate for student choices in selection of reading material.

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Kenneth Goodman's seminal research focused on miscue analysis as a means of understanding the active role the reader takes in bringing meaning to a text. From this research

he was able to theorize that “reading is a far more efficient process than successively recognizing letters and words could ever be” (Goodman, 1996, p. 52). He contends that reading is easiest when authentic language is used and the students have personal or social needs that can be achieved by reading. Similar to Smith, Goodman posits that the brain is doing something far more complex than could ever be achieved by memorizing phonics rules in order to read. He breaks the process of learning to read down to basic steps but still emphasizes the importance of creating a passion for reading in children.

This passion has influenced Goodman to be a leader of the whole language movement and a proponent of a holistic approach to planning and organizing literacy education. He describes the move to whole language as “a move to bring today’s schools in line with today’s wisdom on the most effective education for our society” (Goodman, 1991, p. 17). Whole language is based on theories of learning and of language that support authentic purposes for reading and writing. It promotes learning skills in context, integration of subject matter, and empowering students to take ownership of their learning (Goodman, 1986). Goodman suggests that thematic units be used to teach and that they be organized around problems, issues, and interests that relate to the students’ lives. A teacher who strives to develop a whole language classroom should make product and process important in the classroom and the classroom environment should encourage a learning community to develop. Many of his ideas are supported by creating writing and reading workshops in the classroom.

Nancie Atwell’s prominent work has been the impetus for many teachers to establish writing and reading workshops in their classrooms. The framework that Atwell (1987) uses to structure her classroom consists of seven basic principles: 1) Writers need regular chunks of time; 2) Writers need their own topics; 3) Writers need responses; 4) Writers learn mechanics in context; 5) Children need to know adults who write; 6) Writers need to read; and 7) Writing teachers need to take responsibility for their knowledge and teaching. Atwell’s writings are practical and valuable to practitioners because

they are based on her own experiences teaching middle school students. Many of the aspects of her workshops are similar to those put forward by Lucy Calkins.

Lucy Calkins (1991) tells her readers up front that “my goal is to help youngsters set off on endeavors significant enough that they will want to write and learn with heart and soul” (p. 2). Calkins has made significant contributions to the art of teaching reading and writing. Her beliefs and passion are an inspiration for teachers. Some of her foundational tenets include: connecting with each student, building a community in the classroom that has “a sense of intimacy and of adventure” (Calkins, 1991, p. 20), encouraging students to take ownership of the classroom and their writing, allowing students to choose their own topics to write and read about, reading aloud to students, a workshop approach to writing that includes all the stages in the writing process, and the integration of reading and writing in the classroom. Another basic tenet of the writing workshop is the teacher must also be a writer and a reader and share his/her processes with students. These teachers must value language and transmit that love to their students. A knowledgeable teacher who is passionate about the subject area is the only one who could possibly create the environment necessary for these workshop approaches to thrive. Standardization, in the name of accountability, does not leave room for teachers to use the approaches that these leaders advocate for them.

All of these innovators in literacy education stress the importance of integrating reading and writing in the curriculum. “Reading aloud is the single most important factor to help children become proficient, avid readers” (Calkins, 1999, p. 25). Hearing a story read aloud invites students to lose themselves in the story. This is true for students of all ages, not just those who cannot yet read on their own. Atwell (1991) maintains that “the environment requires literature if it is to become literate” and wonders “what we demonstrate to students about reading when we don’t value books enough to make sure we have some around” (p. 37). Calkins supports reading aloud for support of the reading and writing workshop as well as in support of the content areas.

"It would be wise to support our students as they grow to be stronger listeners to nonfiction texts" (Calkins, 1999, p. 26). Reading aloud in the content areas can give students an overview of the subject so that students are in a better position to learn more and it can be used to model our own learning processes by thinking through the reading aloud for students. These readings can activate students' prior knowledge on a subject before moving to more complex texts on the subject.

Richard and Joanne Vacca and others have investigated content area learning and are important in contributing to this aspect of literacy in this century. While the previous researchers concentrate their efforts on learning to read and write, Vacca and Vacca concentrate on reading and writing to learn the materials presented in the content areas. Vacca and Vacca (1999) suggest that "using language to learn underscores students' meaning-making, thought-producing capabilities" (p. 11). They propose that an essential element that is necessary to bring students and text together is planning done by accomplished teachers. The teacher needs to provide a framework for either core text lessons or thematic units. "The instructional framework and the thematic unit provide the structure for bringing learners and texts together in content areas" (Vacca & Vacca, 1999, p. 207). The framework includes sections for prereading, reading, and postreading instruction for core text lessons. This framework should be detailed enough to provide the essential structure but should also remain flexible, allowing for adaptations and possible changes based on student response. Thus, the advocates extend beyond the teaching of reading and writing to the integration in the content areas.

The span of themes that these scholars cover is impressive. For example, Atwell is recognized for her investigation of workshop approaches to reading and writing and yet she also examines the importance of using writing and reading as learning tools in the content area. Smith is known for his in-depth analysis of reading yet he is also mentioned as a guru of the whole language movement. While this description of the researchers ventures to put them into compartments to define why they are regarded as leaders in literacy education and advocates for

teachers, in reality they are not so easily packaged because much of their work overlaps. They share common beliefs and philosophies that regard learning as student-centered and value authentic purposes for literacy while they each expand the field of literacy in their own significant manner. The scholars listed are by no means all-inclusive, the works of Yetta Goodman, Donald Graves, Cris Tovani, and so many others could also be relied upon to advocate for teachers.

Conclusion

The research conducted by the leaders in this discipline is reflected in numerous ways in schools, programs, and curriculum standards throughout the country. Literacy instruction has changed dramatically because of the impact of these innovators. Today, basic skills that involve surface decoding and the recall of information are no longer sufficient. The new emphasis realizes the need to decode but also features meaning making. "Critical thinking and the ability to personalize meaning to individual experience and apply what is read or written in the real world, under many different circumstances and with many different types of texts, may now be termed the 'new basics'" (Strickland, 1999, xix). These new basics require our teachers to become leaders themselves, able to advocate for advanced curriculums and fight to make sure any attempts at standardization are based on the tenets put forth by the leaders in literacy education.

Practitioners of reading instruction in the past taught using ability groups, basal readers, worksheets, and dull repetition as skill after skill drained the life-force from the text (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1998). Current practitioners who are up on prevailing notions of reading understand that reading is a process; they allow students to interact with various forms of print and listen to texts being read aloud. There is an emphasis on student choice, phonics as a support system, and integration with writing. There is also an emphasis on all students learning to read rather than identifying some students as incapable of reading.

Writing educators have also made far-reaching developments. According to Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde (1998) the qualities of best practices in teaching writing include: accepting that all children can and should write, helping students find real purposes for writing, students taking ownership of their writing, involving students in the complete process of writing, building a classroom context of shared learning, finding real audiences, and incorporating writing throughout the curriculum. The examples that they give of exemplary programs all involve writing workshops. The innovators in literacy education impact teaching and programs alike.

One reason that the leaders in this field have had such a pivotal influence on what practitioners do is because of the standards movement that is sweeping the nation. The National Council for the Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association (IRA) developed standards for the English language arts in 1996. These standards are based on extensive review of research and discussions with educators throughout the country. The NCTE and the IRA posit that “these standards are intended to serve as a guideline that provide ample room for the kinds of innovation and creativity that are essential to teaching and learning” (p. 2). The standards arose from the need to prepare students for literacy demands, to present a collective approach, and “to promote equity and excellence for all” (NCTE & IRA, 1996). The standards are founded on the principles envisioned by the forefathers of literacy education and thus their impact is such that the central ideas of the leading researchers are used by teachers all over the nation. Yet, it is often the push for standardization and accountability that teachers must fight against. When teachers are told that students must prepare for testing and do not have time for authentic reading and writing in their classrooms, then they must turn to the literacy leaders whose research shows the importance of student choice, workshop approaches, pleasure reading, community building in the classroom, and authentic assessments.

The respect that teachers have for the judgments of those who have changed the face

of literacy education is a reciprocal conviction. Allington (1998) stresses the importance of the teacher in the reading instruction equation when he states that “expert teachers produce more readers than other teachers regardless of the curriculum materials used” (p. 4). There are many reasons that the teachers can have such a large impact. Good teachers have more knowledge of literacy acquisition and offer a more comprehensive approach to instruction. Reading and writing fill large blocks of times in good teachers’ classrooms and students are monitored so that interventions match their individual needs. “The key to success is good teachers working within a flexible school framework that allows them to provide the instruction children need” (Allington, 1998, p. 5). We can continue to honor the leaders in literacy education by building communities of literate people in our classrooms and in our communities, and by using the research that they have provided us with to advocate for students as they have advocated for us.

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About the Author

Deborah L. Smith is an Assistant Professor at Saginaw Valley State University in the Department of Middle and Secondary Teacher Education