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Reading, Writing, and Revolution

Why devote an entire issue to reading? During the past decade researchers have discovered some revolutionary ideas about literacy development—when it begins and how it occurs. Current research findings are causing a number of teachers to question the value of some of their traditional approaches to reading instruction. These findings are leading to major curricular and instructional changes at all levels—changes reflected in instructional practices that are meaning-centered and holistic in nature.

So why all the controversy about such a reasonable and logical shift in instructional practices? First of all, change is seldom easy and is often complex. It involves learning to use new terminology that sometimes seems vague. One must first learn how to change, and then actually make the change. In this case change is more complicated because it requires modifying one's entire philosophy about how literacy develops. Furthermore, many classroom teachers lack the necessary support structure to permit or facilitate such a change.

Misunderstandings abound regarding the meaning-centered, holistic approach—what it is and what it is not. Many mistakenly believe that phonics and other skills are not taught in a whole language classroom. Others mistakenly believe that there is no structure in a whole language classroom. Others, unaware of the emphasis on the integration of reading and writing in a whole language classroom, think that whole language is just a “look-say” or language-experience approach with a new name.

Some of the controversy centers on concerns about the materials that teachers will use with a meaning-centered curriculum. How does the Life Reading Series fit into such a program? Does the new approach require the use of outside literature? And if so, will that create problems?

The purpose of this special issue on reading is to address some of these topics. It will help educators to become informed about instructional practices that foster literacy development. It will also help them learn how to move toward holistic language arts instruction in a manageable and responsible way.

This issue will also suggest ways that the Life Reading Series and literature can be used in implementing a meaning-centered curriculum. And it will help to generate a support structure for those teachers wishing to make this shift to more meaningful reading and writing instruction.—Ian Bothwell.

Dr. Ian Bothwell is Chairman of the Department of Education at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California, and Coordinator for this special issue on Reading. The editorial staff expresses its appreciation for her enthusiasm, hard work, and cooperation, without which the issue would never have become a reality.