



Reading Instruction: Moving From “How” to “Why” Through Paradigmatic Clarification

I remember little about 1st grade except the battle my mother waged to ensure that I would be enrolled in Miss Burkett’s class. Rumor had it that the new teacher across the hall used a “newfangled” approach to teaching reading, in contrast to Miss Burkett’s sequential phonics method. Later, as students of both teachers sat side by side in other classrooms, I do not recall any significant differences in their ability to read.

This scene has been played out again and again, for the “reading wars,” as they have been called, have continued for decades. The actors and settings may

change, but the plot—*how* to best teach reading—remains the same. As a result, curricula and instructional methods have proliferated. Is this war winnable?

The Office of Education of the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists has addressed these issues in developing a new reading/language-arts program for its K-8 schools. To provide some background for this discussion, we will briefly trace the history of reading instruction and provide a philosophical and theoretical

context for reading practice. Finally, we will examine the implications for reading instruction.

A Brief History of Reading Instruction

In countries that use an alphabet to represent written language, reading instruction began with alphabetic or phonics approaches. Over time, other methods developed. In the *basal reader approach*, students learn sight words as well as phonics skills and apply them to the reading of short selections of increasing difficulty. A *literature or tradebook approach*, which has students read real

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books, has received increased emphasis in recent years. Finally, a *language experience approach*, which has students compose and read their own texts, has been popular, as well.¹

Based on the success of each of these methods with some students, as well as research indicating that a combination of techniques works best, many reading educators have called for a balanced approach incorporating the best of all four methods.² Recently, in the U.S., the emphasis has moved to a “research-based” approach,³ largely as the result of two reports on best practices in reading instruction—*Becoming a Nation of Readers* (1985)⁴ and the *Report of the National Reading Panel* (2000).⁵ The No Child Left Behind⁶ legislation and the ensuing testing movement, which holds American public schools accountable for students’ reading performance, has also had an impact. Consequently, legisla-

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tors in some states have passed bills mandating a certain approach.

Paradigmatic Clarification

In practice, then, methods of teaching vary from setting to setting due to influences such as tradition, research, and legislation. The decision to adopt one approach over another is generally made after examination of the programs’ methods and materials. This phenomenon has been described as

“waves atop an otherwise still ocean.” Methodology, however, is not really the basis for the debate, for reading is more than technique. As stated by Dorothy Watson, “[reading] . . . is not a program, package, set of materials, method, practice, or technique; rather, it is a perspective on language and learning that *leads to the acceptance* of certain strategies, methods, materials, and techniques . . .”⁷ Judith Newman also pointed out that “[reading] . . .

isn't an instructional approach . . . [but] a philosophical stance."⁸

Although the practical, "how to" features of reading are important, educators rarely think about the philosophy that informs their practice. In stressing the importance of philosophical inquiry to education, John Brubacher lamented that "too few edu-

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cators could formulate or pursue such questions or give adequate responses about why things are done as they are in most schools . . . The study of philosophy of education would help educators build more adequate theoretical bases, and hence, more adequate education."⁹ Examining the philosophical basis for reading instruction helps to reveal underlying paradigms, since each approach is grounded in certain assumptions or beliefs. By analyzing these assumptions, educators can better understand how to address practical issues.

Therefore, teachers need to understand the philosophical assumptions and paradigms underlying each approach to reading instruction. As argued by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*: "Differences in paradigms are differences in worldviews, involving differences in assumptions made, questions asked, evidence taken, and methodologies used."¹⁰ This paradigmatic vocabulary or language thus serves to contextualize theory and practice, providing a way of discussing the world, the things in the world, and the relationships among those things.

There are many diverse ways of discussing the world. Such conceptual-

izations, however, are generally grouped in one of two worldviews—a mechanistic or a holistic paradigm. Beginning with Rene Descartes' and Isaac Newton's work, Western science has viewed the world as composed of separate and independent parts—a mechanistic worldview. In the past several decades, though, many researchers in

both the physical and human sciences have tried to demonstrate that "our vision . . . is undergoing a radical change toward the multiple, the temporal, and the complex"¹¹—a holistic worldview. There is a general awareness of the limitations of the "paradigmatic boundaries" that had previously guided inquiry.¹²



The mechanistic and holistic paradigms can be described in terms of two enabling assumptions—a longitudinal (breadth) assumption and a latitudinal (depth) assumption. The longitudinal assumption conceptualizes the universe in horizontal terms. Applied to the mechanistic paradigm, this belief projects that things exist in static states of being; applied to the holistic paradigm, this belief projects that things consist of dynamic processes or events of becoming. The latitudinal assumption identifies one state or event relative to others and implies more enduring relationships than the longitudinal assumption. Specifically, an event or state is characterized by a particular vertical configuration of parts.¹³

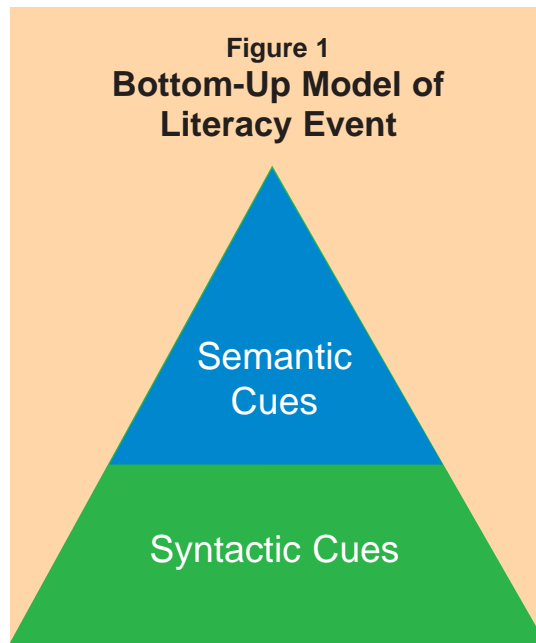
Longitudinal Nature of Reading

Applying the longitudinal assumption to reading suggests that it is an active, dynamic process rather than a static state. With this temporal view, a linguistic structure is in a constant state of flux, which, in turn, entails movement into a new unity or whole. The creation of these temporary relationships constitutes a series of literacy events.

Furthermore, the transition from one literacy event to another is not uniform or linear; reading is not a succession of discrete linguistic structures. Rather, there is a necessary and meaningful connection between literacy events, a complex interrelationship of processes. Reading, therefore, is historically situated; there is an integration of one reading structure in the becoming of another. The present linguistic state, constituted in part by past events, is differentiated from the past by its history. Thus, because a literacy event is not independent of its history, it cannot be understood when separated from its past.

Latitudinal Nature of Reading

The reading process can be further conceptualized in terms of the configuration of the parts that characterize a



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literacy event. There is a general consensus about what is necessary for reading to take place. Three basic parts, known as cueing systems, have been identified: graphophonic or word-level cues (sound and letter patterns), syntactic or sentence-level cues (sentence patterns), and semantic or text-level cues (meanings).¹⁴ A literacy event, then, is characterized by a particular configuration of graphophonic, syntactic, and semantic features. The organization of these parts, however, has been conceptualized in several different ways.

Traditionally, reading has been separated into irreducible, individual parts or skills (i.e., sounds, syllables, words). In this view, a linguistic structure can be understood as a synthesis of independently functioning skills. Produced by an addition of parts, literacy events are aggregates; they maintain a summative rather than a constitutive nature.

Recently, some reading educators have acknowledged the limitations of a mechanistic view, concluding that it is

too fragmented to describe the dynamic nature of reading. No set of “basic building blocks” or discrete skills can be synthesized to generate a linguistic structure because a literacy event is more than the sum of its parts. Reading cannot be subdivided, for it consists of only momentary relations, which are involved in acquiring and relating new information to the whole and from which parts cannot be distinguished—“an unbroken wholeness.” Linguistic skills, therefore, have no significance in isolation; they are understood only through their integrated activity within the whole literacy event. This interde-

pendence of the parts, where a change in one part affects the whole structure, implies that relations are primary, and the parts and the whole are derived.

Based on this more holistic view of the reading process, reading researchers have developed several theories or models to illustrate the relationships among the parts of a literacy event. One theory has a series of interlocking skills arranged in hierarchical levels. This model uses a sequence of linguistic levels. The characteristics of each level are included in higher levels, but not in lower levels, since they are influenced by the general inclusiveness and abstract complexity of the relations between the parts.

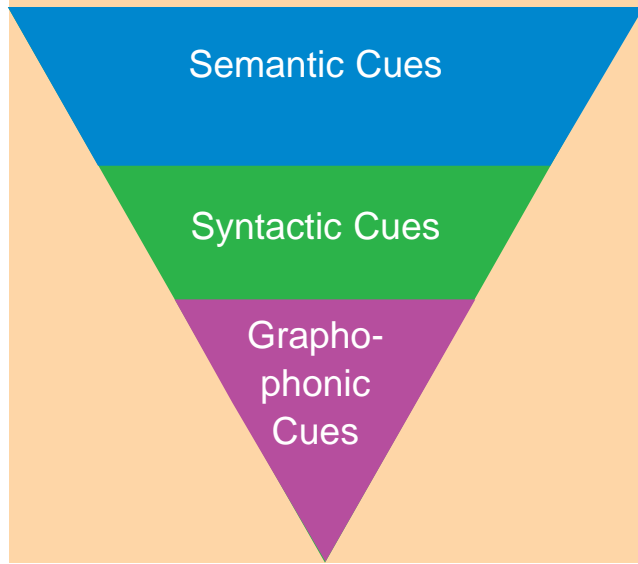
Models utilizing this hierarchical structure manifest either bottom-up or top-down processing. In bottom-up models, decoding of graphic symbols (lower-level processes) occurs first, followed by syntactic and semantic processes (higher-level processes). (See Figure 1.) Correct word identification precedes and automatically ensures comprehension. Reading is seen as a

process of decoding or encoding. During oral reading, children must decode graphic symbols into speech; when reading silently, they must encode graphic symbols into inner speech.

Perceptual (lower-level) and cognitive (higher-level) processes are autonomous in nature, with perception preceding cognition. At each stage, the input is processed and recorded, then the information is transferred to the next level for further processing. The reading process takes on a unified character when the subskills are processed automatically.¹⁵

In top-down models, read-

Figure 2
Top-Down Model of Literacy Event



tween levels, for every part is related to every other part.

Reading, in the Interactive Model, is portrayed as a dynamic web of interrelated processes. (See Figure 3.) Each part or cueing system “unfolds” the whole structure; the whole encompasses each part, and each part encompasses the whole. This model does not view either bottom-up or top-down processing as playing a dominant role in reading comprehension. Rather, there is a cyclical interaction of perceptual and cognitive processes. Each level has the potential to influence all other levels. No one part of this linguistic web has priority; all parts develop

in relation with others. One relationship may assume a significant part while representing the whole, but the purpose is not to suppress the other relations.¹⁷

Implications for Reading Instruction

The “reading wars,” then, will neither be resolved through research (i.e., examining practice) nor argument. The approaches espouse different world-views. But if educators can articulate

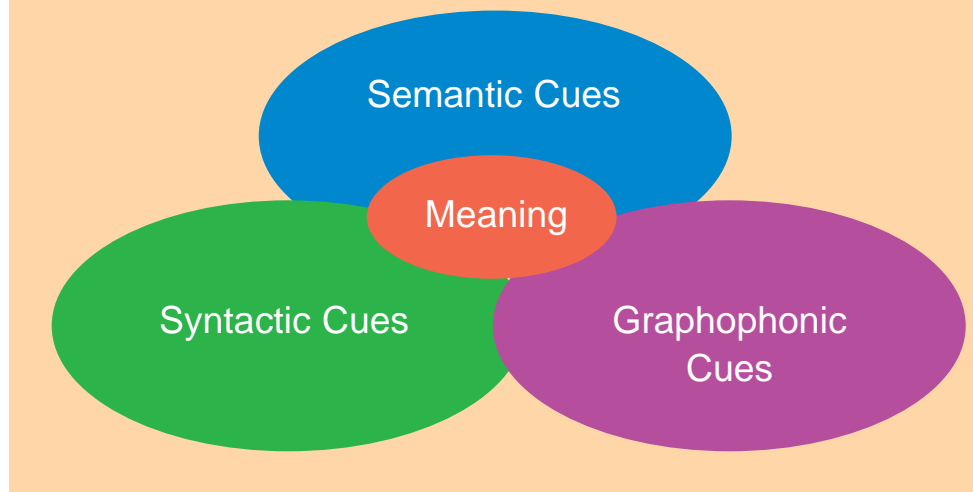
Although the practical, “how to” features of reading are important, educators rarely think about the philosophy that informs their practice.

ing comprehension is influenced more by the cognitive than the perceptual processes. (See Figure 2.) Predictions concerning meaning are accepted or rejected during the processing of information. Graphic cues are used only when either validating or rejecting predictions; if graphic cues do not correspond to syntactic and semantic processing, they are not likely to be employed in the reading process.¹⁶

Despite the fact that these two models are supposed to represent the dynamic and holistic nature of the reading process, some reading educators feel that they do not accurately portray the theoretical complexity of the relations among the cueing systems. A linguistic hierarchy reduces relationships to a single dimension—parts can be related only to what is above or below them, creating a homogeneous organization of skills. A liter-

acy event, however, is heterogenic in nature, and there is no distinction be-

Figure 3
Interactive Model of Literacy Events



their philosophy and beliefs concerning reading, they will have a frame of reference from which to construct, utilize, and evaluate the most appropriate approaches to reading instruction. After clarifying their beliefs, they can move from the “how” (which focuses solely on practice) to the “why” (which focuses on the paradigm that informs their practice).

In order to link theory and practice, the NAD has adopted a holistic view of the reading process. Both the longitudinal (breadth) as well as the latitudinal (depth) aspects of reading have been considered. In terms of breadth, reading is viewed as an active, dynamic process, constituted by a series of meaningfully related literacy events. In terms of depth, a literacy event is viewed as a dynamic web of interrelated parts or cueing systems. Combining the horizontal and vertical aspects of the reading process creates an integrated whole from which meaning of written text can be derived. Simply defined, then, reading is gaining meaning from print.

There is not a direct correspondence between philosophy and practice. However, the adoption of certain beliefs does imply certain practices. First, because of its emphasis on wholeness, the NAD reading program embeds reading instruction in a total language-arts program that addresses the four modes of language (listening, speaking, reading, writing). The decision also suggests a framework for instructional as well as scheduling purposes:

Word Work

- Phonemic Awareness
- Phonics
- Word Study
- Spelling

Guided Reading

- Leveled Readers/Trade Books
- Comprehension
- Vocabulary

Independent Reading

- Read-Alouds
- Reading Workshop
- Fluency

Writing

- Writing Workshop
- Handwriting

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This framework reflects the NAD’s intent to address the whole while maintaining the integrity of the relations among the parts. Many good practices already in use that exemplify this philosophy will be continued. New materials and research-based strategies will be introduced as well.

The purpose of this theme issue on reading is to provide a philosophical as well as a practical context for the new Seventh-day Adventist reading program. The ensuing articles will address critical aspects of the three cueing systems that constitute the breadth and depth of the reading process, as well as related topics. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment issues will also be discussed. The focus is not specifically on the various parts but why, and how, they relate to the whole. ✍



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in Keene, Texas. The editors express their appreciation for her careful and comprehensive work and advice in planning and preparing the issue.

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