

A Book Review of Lucy M. Calkin's

The Art of Teaching Reading

Published by Heinemann, Portsmouth, NH, 1986

By Dr. Patrick Groff, Professor Emeritus
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This book represents a sample of what many future teachers are currently trained to believe about the teaching of written composition and its antecedents: grammar knowledge, handwriting, spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, and the other mechanics of writing. Lucy Calkins, an associate professor of English education at Teachers College, Columbia University, claims the book's content is based on her "research on children's writing development."

She is "grateful," moreover, to Frank Smith, whose "contributions are evident throughout the book." This token of gratitude to Smith explains to a great extent the point of view toward writing instruction that the book takes. Smith is well known to the readers of *Reading Informer* as the leader of the new anti-phonics movement.

It is Calkin's contention that by expecting children to spell correctly, to handwrite in standard ways, and to use conventional punctuations, grammar and paragraphing the "schools set up roadblocks to stifle the natural and enduring reasons (children have) for writing." In her view children must see writing only as "a personal project," that is, they must be given "ownership and responsibility for their writing." Teachers should stop interfering with these rights of pupils so that they can learn to write the same way they learned their oral language. Children will "learn to write by writing," Calkin promises. These conditions will come into being only when teachers desert the "established curriculum." In place of a curriculum the teacher should create stimulating classroom settings, Calkins advises.

All this thought about children and writing is given in the first 28 pages of the book. The remainder of its 347 pages is taken up with examples of children's writing and personal anecdotes the author has collected on the subject. This commentary is offered as proof that her point of view about children and writing is not the correct one.

Examples of Calkin's ideal plan for teachers getting out of the way of children's "ownership" of what they write comes most strikingly in her discussion of the mechanics of writing. Children should not "worry about spelling," she repeatedly exclaims. Incorrect spellings "are not 'wrong' — they are spectacular." The teacher thus should ask pupils, "Who decides how you will spell a word?" The proper answer, according to Calkins, is, "We are the boss of our spelling." Regardless of how children spell, teachers should "delight" in it. Teachers' refusal to respond to children's requests, for help in spelling as they write will reinforce this principle, Calkins notes.

After reading Calkins' views that children have no responsibility to spell words in conventional ways, it is not surprising to find no mention of handwriting in her book in either the table of contents or index. Obviously, Calkins holds that children learn to handwrite by handwriting. This principle applies to punctuation, she goes on. Children will learn punctuation best, she continues, if it is not taught formally, in a direct, intensive or systematic way.

The crossover from whole-word instruction in reading to Calkins' whole language approach to writing is readily apparent. In both cases children are not expected to perform in standard ways. They learn to read and write simply by doing it. No hierarchy of learning activities (curriculum) is called for. The teacher's role is merely to "immerse" children in a reading and writing atmosphere of an attractive nature and then stand aside and observe the resultant remarkable rate of development of literacy in their pupils. Proof of the pudding, in Calkins book, are the samples of exceptional written compositions that she has found occur under these conditions.

There are so many faults with Calkins' presumptions about writing instruction that one hardly knows where to begin to point them out. Major among these errors is the notion that indirect teaching, in which children control what goes on, brings on greater pupil achievement than does direct instruction wherein children come to recognize clearly what they are to learn and are given careful supervision by teachers to make sure the pupils use their time efficiently.

I have previously questioned Calkins' theory that if one allows children to freely "invent" their spellings and not be required to spell correctly, they will best learn to spell (*Elementary School Journal*, January 1986). I pointed out that the critical fallacy of this notion is the fatal tendency of its advocates to ignore the mass of research that refutes its authenticity. It thus is a non sequitur to argue, as Calkins does, that because there may be some logical thinking behind some of the spelling errors children make, no systematic attempts should be taken to prevent the mistakes.

Calkins' use of examples of children's writings as evidence to prove her beliefs about how they best learn to write also is misleading. These samples were gathered, she says, from 8 years of work with children. Since teachers who use any form of instruction would likely find extraordinary pieces of composition from pupils, the evidence that Calkins offers is irrelevant. She provides no statistical data that children taught the way she recommends are on the average better writers than those taught with other methods. There is no assurance, therefore, that use of the method Calkins advocates will relieve the writing crisis reported in *The Writing Report Card* (*Educational Testing Service*, 1986). Calkins' belief that "many young writers will need very little help in spelling," reveals how out of touch with the writing crisis she appears to be.

The tragedy of Calkins' book lies in its compulsion toward extremism. On the one hand, there is much in text on how to interest children in writing that doubtless is commendable. The calamity of the volume, on the other hand, is its practice of commingling sensible, useful ideas with radical, unproved suppositions about the teaching of writing. Therefore, for the book to have utility, its reader has to carefully tread through a minefield of misinformation to get to pockets of worthwhile enlightenment.

Future teachers who are given this book to read have little or no ability to make such a selective journey. They are likely to take at face value all Calkins says. In this event, her book becomes a dangerous impediment to the improvement or reform of writing instruction that *The Writing Report Card* shows the nation so desperately needs.

There is a revealing and even ominous postscript I would add to this review: the fact that Calkins' book is published by **Heinemann Educational Books**. It has become increasingly apparent that this publishing house has made the editorial decision to become the principal purveyor of writers who advocate the whole language approach to children's reading and writing development. Whereas other publishers print books on these subjects that take varying positions regarding the direct and indirect teaching of literacy, Heinemann opens its pages only to proponents of the whole language approach.

It is wise for supporters of intensive phonics teaching to be aware that Heinemann books inevitably will oppose their point of view. In effect, **Heinemann** has elected to ally itself with the *National Council of Teachers of English* and other educational groups who obviously bear in great part responsibility for the deplorable state of affairs depicted in *The Writing Report Card*. **Heinemann's actions in this respect makes it part of the problem it professes to ameliorate.**

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I found this article by Dr. Groff of great interest. I have been retired from public education for five years now. I taught for 21 years in public schools, mostly bilingual and Spanish. My first full time classroom was a 2nd grade bilingual class. The whole-language philosophy was just beginning to trickle into the classrooms. Our principal was a very nice lady with a great love for children, but she was also a professor in a local college and leading proponent of whole-language. My daughter studied elementary reading under her. There was no mention of phonics in the college classroom. When the students brought up the subject, they were told that they would get all the information they needed in their teacher's manuals. It was about three years later that the district pulled the handwriting, spelling books, and grammar books out of the classrooms in favor of teacher-made unit type instruction. My experience was a little better, but not much, our professor passed out a two-page handout on phonics, saying we wouldn't need it much. That was all!

Fortunately, I had a strong background in grammar, phonics, cursive handwriting, and composition so I was able to continue teaching these subjects just as I had been taught in the 1950's. I paid particular attention to older teachers who were reaching retirement age. Many of them took me under their wings and warned me of the dangers they saw with the whole-language methodology that was being promoted in the classrooms. I had several tell me they never had a non-reader when they taught programs like the old *Open Court: Foundation Program* (This is completely different from the new *Open Court* and *Imagine It* from SRA/McGraw-Hill.), Dr. Charles Walcutt's *Basic Reading*, and *Economy's Phonetic Keys to Reading*, and the *Palo Alto* reading program. None of these programs are currently available, nor has anything comparable, to my knowledge, replaced them. These seasoned and successful teachers also told me that I could teach reading just using the district's spelling program, which to their chagrin soon thereafter disappeared from the classrooms.

I found it very interesting to find Dr. Groff specifically mention the publisher **Heinemann** since much of the whole-language materials we studied bore that publisher's name. In my opinion, it is a tragedy that Dr. Groff's warning was not heeded. I consider his article pertinent today because of the continued misperceptions concerning the importance of teaching skills in a sequential and informed manner. A trip the **Heinemann** website will show that they continue to promote whole-language (now called Guided Reading aka Fountas & Pinnell) and publish Calkins' materials.

Concerning **Heinemann**, Keith E. Stanovich remarked, "Indeed, it is easy to rationalize nonresponse in a situation such as the one I've just described. One could spend one's whole life correction such errors. There are whole books of misinformed critiques of the research literature published by **Heinemann** on a regular basis – and the NCTE as an organization seems dedicated to presented distorted representations of the research literature to teachers. This situation is not unlike that of physical and social sciences and their response to ESP reports presented in the media." (*Progress in Understanding Reading: Scientific Foundations and New Frontiers*, 2000, p. 376)

Concerning spelling, Ronald P. Carver in his, *Causes of High and Low Reading Achievement*, maintains that teaching accurate spelling increases fluency (reading rate, which he calls “reading rate”) and thereby increases reading achievement and not just spelling. To neglect accurate spelling is to diminish reading rate and hamper comprehension. I believe Carver is correct in this regard, which is why I teach the spelling of 3,033 words to my first-grade tutoring students using *Blumenfeld’s Alpha-Phonics*.

See my, “Samuel L. Blumenfeld Reading Clinic” webpage for detailed information on how I teach reading via spelling. I would like to thank Mr. Blumenfeld and Kathy Diehl for sending me their precious copies of the *Reading Informer*.

I have published several speeches and papers presented that Dr. Groff gave at the *Reading Reform Foundation Conferences*. They are all very valuable and of abiding relevance. You can access them on the Education Page of my website: www.donpotter.net

So far, I have published or have links to the following articles:

1. Myths of Reading Instruction - and why they persist.
2. Sight-Words the Humpty Dumpty of Reading Instruction.
3. The New Anti-Phonics is the Same Old Look Say.
4. How to Teach Children to Read Word.
5. Review of Lucy M Calkin's *The Art of Teaching Reading*.
6. Whole Language: Emancipatory Pedagogy or Socialist Nonsense.
7. Handwriting, and its Relationship to Spelling
8. Roll Call of the Combatants in the Reading Wars.
9. Children's Identification of Word In and Out of Context.
10. The Mythology of Reading: I - Sight Words.
11. The Usefulness of Pseudowords.
12. Is Dyslexia Scientifically Confirmed? Or is it caused by the ineffective teaching of reading?
13. Two Reactions to the Report Card on Basal Readers. A debate between Constance Weaver (Whole Language) and Patrick Groff (Direct Instruction in Phonics).
14. Private Sector Alternatives for Preventing Reading Failure – The Introduction
15. “The Syllable: It’s Nature and Pedagogical Usefulness” (1971)

Last revised on June 17, 2019.

Dr. Groff passed away in the spring of 2014. I appreciate my years of correspondence with the great scholar.