A Book Review of Lucy M. Calkin's

The Art of Teaching Reading

Published by Heinemann, Portsmouth, HN, 1986

By Dr. Patrick Groff, Professor Emeritus
San Diego (CA) State University.

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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Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

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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 "rauding 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.

Links to Internet Resources on Lucy Calkins

Latest additions on May 23, 2022

Internet Links to give insights into Lucy Calkins' views on teaching reading.

https://blog.heinemann.com/new-units-of-study-in-phonics-with-lucy-calkins

Calkins wrote the Afterword for this document on Whole Language and spelling.

https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED397400.pdf

Understanding Lucy Calkins' Writing Workshop Model: A Guide for Parents

https://www.sps186.org/downloads/basic/356668/A%20Parent

https://readysetwritesite.wordpress.com/2016/09/20/lucy-calkins-the-foundation-of-modern-language-arts-education/

"The Lucy Calkins Project: parsing a self-proclaimed literacy guru." From the Hoover Institute, 2007.

https://www.thefreelibrary.com/The+Lucy+Calkins+project%3a+parsing+a+self-proclaimed+literacy+guru.-a0166786435

Is Lucy Calkins Legally Insane. (2013) highly critical

https://southbronxschool.blogspot.com/2013/02/is-lucy-calkins-legally-insane.html

How Lucy Calkins, literary guru and Fariña ally, is fighting to define Common core teaching.

https://www.chalkbeat.org/posts/ny/2014/04/24/how-lucy-calkins-literacy-guru-and-farina-ally-is-fighting-to-define-common-core-teaching/

The Reading Wars Again (or Still)

http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/top_performers/2014/07/the_reading_wars_again_or_still.html

Here is a recent (2019) review of a recent article by Calkins.

https://www.corelearn.com/lucy-calkins-on-the-science-of-reading-seriously/

https://righttoreadproject.com/2019/11/26/dear-lucy/

Here is a good response from the Fordham Institute.

https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/commentary/misdirection-and-self-interest-how-heinemann-and-lucy-calkins-are-rewriting-common

Here is a December 6, 2019 article by Mark Seidenberg concerning Lucy Calkins.

https://seidenbergreading.net/2019/12/06/lucy-calkins-on-the-attack/
Here is the 1986, first edition of Lucy Calkins' The Art of Teaching Reading.

https://archive.org/details/artofteachingwri00calk/mode/2up

Here is the 2001 edition of Lucy Calkins' *The Art of Teaching Reading*. You can read it for yourself and make your own judgment.

https://archive.org/details/artofteachingrea00calk

Here is *Practicing What We know: Informed Reading Instruction*, Edited by Constance Weaver which is a good introduction to Whole Language. I attended a rather lengthy video training with Andrea Butler. I carried a copy of Sam Blumenfeld's *Alpha-Phonics* with me to the sessions as a talisman to protect me from any negative influence.

https://archive.org/details/practicingwhatwe00cons

Units of Study for Teaching Writing, grades 3-5: *Memoir: The Art of Writing Well* by Calkins and Chiarella (2006).

https://archive.org/details/unitsofstudyfort0000unse/mode/2up

Small Moments: Personal Narrative Writing (2003) Calkins & Oxenhorn. Published by First Hand.

https://archive.org/details/smallmomentspers0000calk/mode/2up

Emily Hansford: *A Story.* This is a series of podcasts concerning Guided Reading and Units of Study.

https://features.apmreports.org/sold-a-story/

Comparing Reading Research to Program Design: An Examination of Teachers College Units of Study. (Jan. 2020) by Marilyn Jager Adams, Lily Wong Fillmore, Claude Goldenberg, Jane Oakhill, David D. Paige, Timothy Rasinski, and Timothy Shanahan.

https://achievethecore.org/content/upload/Comparing%20Reading%20Research%20to%20Program%20Design_An%20Examination%20of%20Teachers%20College%20Units%20of%20Study%20FINAL.pdf?fbclid=IwAR18pdb01S7Cb4tr1N0xAnZnB-3_Z-ulzC_yG0yYRp1YxCnpTR3mItjHno8

Here is an excerpt from *Raising Lifelong Learners: A Parent's Guide* (1998) by Lucy Calkins and Lydia Bellino. pp. 97 – 102.

The Debate about Phonics

Some people think that there are two camps of reading educators, the "phonics camp" and the "literature-based (or whole-language) camp. "Unfortunately, different people mean very different things when they say "I'm a whole-language educator" or "I believe in phonics." And both whole-language educators and phonics-based educators can teach in ways that are problematic. No labels describing a person's teaching philosophy can guarantee that children will flourish under it.

When I find whole-language or literature-based classrooms to be problematic, it is usually because the teachers, intent on supporting children's reading and their love of reading, fill their classrooms with so many literature-based arts and crafts projects and easy-to-memorize books that have little meaning, that children don't have enough time to read real books with rigor and thoughtfulness. Once in a while I find teachers who are so dedicated to encouraging children to love reading and writing that they are reluctant to hold each child accountable for doing their best work.

Phonics-based classrooms are problematic for different reasons. Often in these rooms, children devote most of their reading time to filling out worksheets and doing exercises. And, typically, only one skill is developed in an exercise, making this work much less challenging than actual reading, which requires children to draw on an array of skills. Children who interpret reading as filling out worksheets tend not to grow to love reading, nor to understand why other people like to read. Children in phonics-based classrooms also may develop an overreliance on sounding out words, and subsequently read in a belabored, staccato fashion.

Dividing reading educators into these two camps is misleading because people then conclude that literature-based educators do not believe in phonics or that phonics educators never allow children to read real books. Neither is true. Most reading educators in both camps value phonics and whole stories.

Neither Lydia nor I would call ourselves members of the phonics-only camp, but the idea that we don't believe in phonics is fallacious. The word phonics refers to the relationship between the letters on pages and the sounds and meanings of those words, between an M and a "mmmm" sound. Obviously, when a six-year-old child draws a cat and says, "Cat, cat, ccccaaaatttt," and then writes CAT (or KAT), the child has used phonics. And when a child reads, phonics is one of the clues she relies on in order to bring meaning to the words on a page. When the child reads, "I jumped on my- "and then pauses over the next word, the fact that it begins with a "b" will of course be one of the clues she uses to guess "bike." The issue has never been whether phonics is a part of reading, only whether phonics is the only key to achieving success in reading. It's probably more accurate to call these camps "phonics-only" and "phonics and meaning."

Phonics-based educators are apt to direct the child who is stymied over the word bike to "sound it out" or "break it down." They might also cover part of the word with a thumb so that the child moves sequentially from saying "b/ /b/" to "/i/ /i/" to "/k/ /k/." Then they might say, "Blend it together."

With a child who had just hesitated after reading, "I jumped on my-"I might say, "Sound it out." But I am more apt to say any one of these comments:

- "Hmmm..what could that be?" Rereading the line, I'd muse, "I jumped on my –."
- "Can you give it a go? Try it." and I'd watch whether the child rereads and tries again, looks at the picture, or sounds it out; and I'd talk about the strategies she tends to use when she's stuck.
- "Let's look at the picture and see if that helps. 'I jumped on my-
- "Let's read on for a minute. I do that a lot, don't you? I jumped on my something and rode away.' "Hmm . . ."
- "Let's back up and try that sentence again and see if we can figure out what the word **could** be."

I'd help the child in these ways rather than simply saying "sound it out" because I regard phonics as only one of several resources or cueing systems available to readers. In general, though, I find it more efficient to rely first on meaning and on the sound of the sentence. Phonics, in my experience, is most useful when a reader already has some general notion of what a word should be. In the sentence, "I jumped on my b-," it becomes clear that the missing word is probably a thing, and although words such as bit or but might be phonetically reasonable, they wouldn't sound right. Children who rely on the meaning (semantics) and sound (syntax) of a sentence first, would make different errors, perhaps guessing "horse." Although there are ways in which this is an incorrect guess, it is also half-right, and so I'd support the right aspect of the answer. Then I would point out that the word starts with a "b," and encourage a second guess. The "b" in bike is very helpful to the child who doesn't know whether the character has jumped on a horse, a motorcycle, or a bike.

Phonics is even more necessary to children who are writing their own stories, for they need to provide not just the initial letters, but all of the letters in the words. I do my most intensive instruction in phonics, then, when children are writing. (For more on this, review my discussions of spelling in Chapters 3 and 8.)

It's easy to understand why learning to read is often regarded first and foremost as being about learning to sound out and blend words. Frank Smith, one of the world's foremost reading researchers, suggests that many adults hold onto the idea that reading is, above all, about unlocking strings of sounds, then adding them together to make a word, because *phonics works once you know what a word says*. He explains that adults, look on

while a child reads the word hotel, know just from word recognition what he is trying to read. There explains that adults, looking on while a child reads the word hotel, know just from word recognition what he is trying to read. Therefore, when we urge that child to sound it out, we fully expect that he will begin by making the ho sound, as in Santa's "ho, ho, ho." But as Smith explains in *Reading without Nonsense*, the child who doesn't yet know the word adds up to be hotel has no way of differentiating among the fifteen sounds the letters ho can represent (hot, holy, hoot, horse, house, home, and hoist). That child is not likely to articulate correctly the first syllable in hotel. He may, for example, read "hot." Similarly, when adults read the word father and urge a child to sound it out, we, already knowing what the word says, expect the child to begin with "fa¨ and then move to "ther." And we expect that a child sounding out fathead will see the ¨th¨ differently.

An overreliance on phonics can cause reading problems, because in the English language, letters don´t stand for just one or two possible sounds. As Smith explains, the letter "o" alone can be pronounced more than a dozen ways (consider the difference between brook and blood.) For this reason, Smith says, "The spelling to sound correspondences of English are so confusing that, in my judgment, children who believe they can read unfamiliar words just by 'blending' or 'sounding them out' are likely to develop into disabled readers."

When Lydia and I encounter struggling readers in third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade classrooms, almost inevitably these children think that reading is all about sounding out words, not trying to make sense of a story. They struggle in part because they have learned misguided ideas about reading.

Alphabet Work

Children's immersion in sound-letter correspondences should occur in connection with, not before, other aspects of literary development. Although both Miles and Evan entered first grade as reasonably strong readers and writers, neither of them knew how to print, identify, and sound out all the letters of the alphabet. To this day, Evan doesn't know the proper way to make a "q," but that hasn't kept him from being an avid reader and writer. Growth in reading doesn't proceed in a step-by-step fashion beginning with mastery of the alphabet. However, in our house, we did incorporate some instruction in the alphabet. This instruction tended not to feel like schoolwork. For example, I sometimes drew letters on my son's soapy backs while they sat in the bathtub together, and inevitably I made the letters they love most, E-V-A-N or M-I-L-E-S, or an "L" for love, a "B" for butt.... Sometimes I'd trace letters on their backs in order to send secret codes as part of our goodnight back rubs. Often John made pancakes in the shapes of letters. Or we'd play "I spy" using letters, in this way: "I spy something yellow that begins with a "B." Sometimes we'd bend our bodies into letters, and "spell" words to each other. I'd climb onto my hands and feet, hump up my back, and do all I could to become an "M." We had our own names for the letters of the alphabet, too: "M" was mountains, the upper-case "B" big belly.

We also found letters everywhere. We talked about letters when we stopped at stop signs and when we followed the blue H signs to the hospital. We identified the letters that indicated which restroom was for them and which was for me. We noticed letters on signs at the beach (No Diving), in their bowl of alphabet soup, on the ice cream truck, and on Lego boxes and milk cartons. Of course we noticed letters in books, too, as when they'd poke their heads under my arm to peer at the pages of my novels, interrupting me to say, "I can read your book. It says U-N-T... "Mostly, however, my sons' introduction to the alphabet came as we talked about sound-letter correspondence while they wrote.

Writing time has always been a forum for working with sound-letter correspondences. Once my boys became independent spellers, I welcomed their questions about spelling. Recently Evan asked me for the spelling of "talk." Usually, when he asks me how to spell something, I respond by asking him what he thinks would be a good guess. This time, however, I just rattled off the letters. Copying them onto his page, he paused to say, "Wow. That is weird." Then he added, "I'd only have gotten two of them [the letters] right. "He whispered "talk" to himself, and looked again at the letters. "Weird," he muttered again. Then, turning to me, he asked, "Which of these letters has the /w/sound?" That evening, Evan and I began a list on the refrigerator of words that rhyme with talk

My point is I don't recommend giving children a great many workbooks or computer programs by which to drill them on letters of the alphabet. In and of themselves, such drills are fine, as long as they're not the main literary event in a home. If a child spends 10 minutes several times a week playing with a fun, lighthearted computer program in which letters sing and dance, this certainly is fine. But when I find homes or schools in which literary work primarily involves worksheets and computer programs, I do object. A computer program that instructs "Circle the pictures that start with an 'S'" isolates phonics from meaning. Worksheets on sounds are no better. Also, this work is unambitious. It is easy and dull. Such exercises don't ask as much of a child as does actual reading or writing. I want children to understand what reading is, why we read, and how we read.

[My only comment on Lucy Calkin's views on phonics is that it appears she never taught a simple phonics program like Hazel Loring' *Reading Made Easy with Blend Phonics for First Grade* (1980), which teaches kids to read with phonics **without** any worksheets or computer programs, and has an incomparable track record of success. Four months at the beginning of first grade enables most students to be able to read any first grade reading material – and usually somewhat above grade level.]

www.blendphonics.org

I should also mention that I agree with Marilyn J. Adams that a prior knowledge of the alphabet is helpful for developing phonemic awareness. Pace *ABC Foundations for Young Children*, and Don Potter's "Alphabet Writing and Identification Materials."

http://donpotter.net/pdf/alphabet_fluency.pdf