A Brief History of 'The Reading Wars'

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The so-called 'Reading Wars' have a long history within Reading Education (https://supermemo.guru/wiki/Reading_wars_are_over:_Whole_language_vs._Phonics). They began as a series of competing pedagogies, 'Method A' versus 'Method B' arguments, which were hotly defended and/or attacked by advocates and adversaries within the professional bodies representing reading education and resurface regularly, often fueled by media's tendency to polarise the debate.

In the 1950s (when I began teaching) these debates involved a choice between two pedagogies, one based on a 'look-and-say' or 'whole word' based on visual-recognition-of-word-shapes principle, the other based on a transform-the-visual-signs-to-speech-sounds principle or 'phonics'.

The debates about these two pedagogies can be traced back to a German educator, Professor Friederich Gedike, (https://www.bl.uk/eblj/1978articles/pdf/article11.pdf)
who in 1779 wrote an essay in which he argued that reading instruction should go from whole words to the parts of these words, i.e. the letters. Since that time the debate between whole-to-part advocates and part-to-whole advocates has been a recurring feature of reading education.

In the modern era this debate was re-ignited with the 1967 publication of Chall's classic volume, *Learning to Read: The great debate*. Although Chall renamed the two approaches as 'code-based' versus 'meaning-based', reading pedagogy was still framed as an either/or choice between two theoretical options. By 'code-based' Chall meant the part-to-whole process of transforming the visual display to sounds and blending these sounds together to make words. By 'meaning-based' she meant the 'whole-to-part' process of accessing meaning directly from the visual display without first accessing sound.
https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwiblJq5g7_tAhXk6XMBHYR0DwMQFjAFegQICxAC&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.internationalsped.com%2Fdocuments%2F171katz.DOC&usg=AOvVaw3rbXjuXu8syXWCFmcZRVQl. Despite the renaming of the issue, it was essentially a continuation of the 'look-say' vs 'phonics' debate. By the seventies and eighties this code-based vs meaning based debate had morphed into a series of variant strains of the same dichotomy such as 'literature-based' versus 'skills-based', 'implicit' versus 'explicit', 'holistic' versus 'fragmented' and 'top-down' versus 'bottom-up'.

The term 'whole-language' as a variant of 'meaning-based' first appears in the literature in 1992 in a Canadian publication, *Whole Language Evaluation for Classrooms* by Oran Cochran. It quickly spread to the USA where 'whole-language' versus 'phonics' became the main way of describing the issue. However, the term 'whole language' doesn't appear in the Australian reading community till around the mid-nineties.

Such a long history means that today's teachers are heirs to a long tradition of (often acrimonious and unhelpful) debate about pedagogical methods, which are presented either as bi-polar opposites, or positions along a bi-polar continuum of some kind. It's as if the field of reading has, for a long time, suffered from something analogous to serious bi-polar disorder.

From the late nineties to the present time these dichotomies seem to have coalesced into something more complex. They are no longer perceived as 'debates'. Rather they seem to have assumed the stature of 'wars'.

Thus, we now have the so-called 'reading (or literacy) wars'. Instead of debating the pros and cons of a simple bi-polar dichotomy, the profession seems to be immersed in an all-out 'take-no-prisoners' war often led by psychologists and other experts in related disciplines standing outside the classroom.

The use of this military metaphor first appeared in an article entitled, *From a 'Great Debate' to a Full-Scale War: Dispute over teaching reading heats up,* by Robert Rothman in the 1990 edition of the journal, Education Week. It was quickly picked up by a Californian grandmother named Marion Joseph. She claimed to be concerned that her grandchildren were being denied access to becoming literate because Chall's research was being ignored by the Californian system. With the help of a Californian superintendent, Bill Honig, she mounted a relentless media campaign using the term 'reading wars' to force the Californian government to mandate a phonics first program in public schools. This notion of 'reading wars' began appearing in the Australian context in the mid to late 90s and has ebbed and flowed since then. Most recently in Australia the 'wars' have been characterised as 'synthetic phonics' versus 'balanced literacy' although 'balanced literacy' has often been erroneously conflated with 'whole language'.

A consequence of these 'reading wars' was the demand that only pedagogies, which are 'evidence-based', or 'scientifically derived' should be applied in the nation's literacy classrooms.

However, invoking 'science' and 'evidence-based research' as a way to reduce the theoretical confusion surrounding literacy education doesn't seem to have helped much (https://www.alea.edu.au/documents/item/47).There are quite distinct views of 'good science' and 'good evidence' held within the education research community. All that seems to have happened is that a new round of argument and debate about whose science and whose evidence should be considered, has begun**.**

Such a state of affairs begs the following question: Why is reading education so pedagogically confused? The answer to this question lies in history as well as in different understandings about what reading is.

My research and the hundreds of research papers written on this topic have led me to believe that the notion of 'teaching phonics effectively' is contingent on how one defines, thinks, and talks about such concepts as 'effective reading' and 'effective learning'. Until the community comes to some agreement on what these terms actually entail in the 2020s and beyond, the same theoretical squabbles will continue to plague education. Such theoretical arguments are not helpful for the teaching profession or the teaching of reading. To date, not enough attention has been paid to educators' experiences and their evidence in helping children learn to read in classroom contexts.

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To cite this paper: Cambourne, B. (2021) *A brief history of the 'reading wars'* https://foundationforlearningandliteracy.info