

Blackboard Bungle: Why California Kids Can't Read

By Jill Stewart

Rebecca, a tiny pony-tailed second-grader, sits in class at a Westside grade school that is among the best in Los Angeles. She is contemplating her personal journal, the latest classroom rage for teaching kids to read. She toils with a pencil, filling a page with her crooked sentences, then proudly hands the work to me, a visitor. "I can't spell," Rebecca says shyly, "but I know what it means."

I read the page. It begins, "I go t gum calls." This, Rebecca explains with a slight frown, means "I go to gym class." I read on, but cannot do so without Rebecca's help. I cannot determine where her sentences end, since she has not been taught punctuation. Nor can I glean her meaning by relying upon key words, because they are incomprehensible. Seed is written "sd", for example, smile is "sinil."

Although Rebecca is clearly tense and worried, the teacher cheerfully tells Rebecca she will "do just fine" in time. Indeed, Rebecca's teacher tells me later that she considers barely legible personal journals to be "very good," and red correction marks on a student's work by an authority figure to be "bad."

At a school on the east side of Los Angeles, 7 1/2-year-old Manuel swaggers up to his teacher with a thin, simplistic storybook. Manuel reads quickly - too quickly. He turns the pages long before he is done "reading" them. It is clear that he has memorized the story. I notice a small boy near Manuel, whispering words to him. The teacher praises Manuel for trying. When the friend moves off, I ask Manuel to read the first page, beginning with the word "the." He cannot read the word "the." In fact, he cannot read at all. His teacher hopes that with enough time immersed in fun books, Manuel will finally pick up reading.

While these new techniques known as "whole language" may seem bizarre, they now predominate in classrooms from Marin County to San Diego, and this hottest fad since the "open" classroom of the 1970s is now marching across the country. The techniques, now growing popular in such states as Texas, North Carolina, Washington, Florida, Maryland and Massachusetts, stem from a philosophy which says that many children are poor readers because the old skills-based approach that emphasized phonics and memorization turned reading into a hated chore, alienating kids from reading.

In 1987, whole language theory began its sweep across California in the form of a nationally acclaimed reading "framework" adopted by the state Board of Public Instruction that downplays the teaching of traditional reading skills. "The core idea of whole language," says one of its most vocal proponents, Mel Grubb of the California Literature Project, "is that children no longer are forced to learn skills that are disembodied from the experience of reading a story. The enjoyment and the wonder of the story is absorbed just as the skills are absorbed."

The central tenets of the philosophy hold that small children trained with such techniques will write more expressively, love reading, fully consider whole meaning over mere words, and emerge as more sophisticated readers, writers and thinkers.

But whole language, which sounds so promising when described by its proponents, has proved to be a near-disaster when applied to--and by--real people. In the eight years since whole language first appeared in the state's grade schools, California's fourth-grade reading scores have plummeted to near the bottom nationally, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress(NAEP). Indeed, California's fourth graders are now such poor readers that only the children in Louisiana and Guam--both hampered by pitifully backward education systems--get worse reading scores.

Charges and countercharges are flying as opposing sides try to affix blame for the deepening reading debacle. It has become clear that many of the problems stem from a tragic misreading of California's 1987 reading framework, in which school administrators saw whole language techniques not merely as a helpful supplement to the traditional lessons needed by children in kindergarten through the third grade, but as a wholesale replacement for them. Hundreds of grade school principals banned spelling tests outright, saying childrens' natural urge to read and write was being stifled by pressure from teachers to be precise. At hundreds more, phonics was prohibited by principals who said it was meaningless to grade schoolers, citing a now-infamous absurdity from a traditional reading primer: "The cat sat on a fat hat."

While some teachers found ways to combine the best elements of whole language with the needed skills of the old methods, others used whole language to escape the hard and time-consuming work of instructing beginning readers in phonics, grammar, spelling and other basic reading skills. The training grade school teachers were given to adapt the new ideas to the classroom was heavy on philosophy and soft on how to teach little kids to actually read.

The situation has deteriorated so far that former California Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig, who oversaw the creation of the reading framework, has distanced himself from it, calling the framework "fatally flawed" particularly for its failure to anticipate the whole language overreaction. Indeed, he is now at the forefront of an opposition movement that is trying to reintroduce intensive teaching of rudimentary reading skills to grade schoolers

Says Honig today: "Things got out of hand. School administrators and principals thought they were following the framework when they latched onto whole language, and our greatest mistake was in failing to say, 'Look out for the crazy stuff, look out for the overreactions and the religiously anti-skills fanatics.' We totally misjudged which voices would take charge of the schools. We never dreamed it would be driven to this bizarre edge. When I tell people that we never even say the phrase 'whole language' anywhere in the document, they look at me like I'm mad."

A Reading Task Force appointed by California Superintendent Delaine Eastin has urged a return to intensive, sequentially taught reading skills in early grade school, while retaining whole language's use of rich literature and early writing. But Eastin has been met with a palace revolt in her department and from local bureaucracies such as the Los Angeles County Office of Education in the south and Petaluma School District in the north--just two of scores of defiant local bureaucracies where whole language ideologues are firmly in control.

Bitter resistance from these whole language purists has delayed Eastin's reform plan, which early reading experts widely agree must heavily re-emphasize the direct, explicit teaching of "word attack" decoding skills such as phonics, a renewed emphasis on spelling and grammar, and the teaching of "phonemic awareness"--a way to overcome learning disabilities in the 10-20% of children who cannot hear the distinct letter sounds within words. Taking a cue from the country's most successful reading efforts, the task force has urged the teaching of grade school reading 2-3 hours per day--an emphasis California has moved away from as it has shifted toward secondary subjects such as personal health care.

Already, a letter has been sent to publishers alerting them that California will select new textbooks which must return to basic lessons. And in a slap at educators, Sacramento legislators approved an "ABCs" bill requiring that grade schools teach phonics, signed into law by Gov. George Deukmejian, and lawmakers are now pursuing a similar spelling law. Meanwhile, Honig has authored a new book, *Teaching Our Children to Read*, a call to reincorporate "essential beginning-to-read strategies" in preschool through third grades nationwide.

State officials describe the state's emerging reading plan as a "balancing" of two failed extremes--overly repetitive, unnecessarily rigid, basic skills and whole language. Eastin says the proposals are based on "solid research and a growing consensus about how children learn to read." But critics fear that without mass training, especially for newer teachers who have little grasp of how to teach early reading skills, the plan could easily fail.

Says Douglas Carnine, a University of Oregon reading scholar and one of Eastin's top consultants, "I fear that the education leaders in California still don't see the real problem that has sent California to the absolute bottom in reading. You cannot keep using an entire state as an experiment. You wouldn't administer a drug to 3 million people without testing it first, would you?"

How California got itself into such a quagmire, and how the state is now struggling to pull out of it, is a cautionary study in the pitfalls of untested mass innovation.

THE SEEDS OF the current reading disaster were planted with the best of intentions in a quiet meeting room in Sacramento. There, in 1986, a select group of educators, invited by then-Superintendent Honig, met to brainstorm about ways to set California on a new

course in reading. Early participants remember an important undercurrent: they felt their ideas could influence the entire nation.

As participants recall the opening day, Honig gave a ringing speech about creating a document that would inspire dramatic change. "I told them to dream, and to forget about old rules that weren't working," says Honig. Says professor Jesus Cortez Jr. from Cal State Chico, "somebody stood up and said that we were there to create a new generation of superior thinkers and readers and writers who would run the businesses and set the policies of the 21st Century. Creating that new generation was the dominant theme from Day One."

Honig asked very few reading experts to join the lofty project, because he wanted a broad mix of teachers and scholars without a pre-set agenda. Pure thought and open exchange of ideas were the order of the day. But key participants recall that, from the start, debate in the meetings was dominated by secondary school teachers and scholars--people who knew nothing about the difficult art of teaching small children how to read. The secondary school representatives emerged as natural leaders because they, more than anyone, were driven by tremendous frustration over skyrocketing dropout rates, the hatred many teenagers expressed for reading, and the embarrassing levels of remedial reading required by California high school seniors entering college.

"The people who knew how the middle and upper grades would react to reading were very, very strong," says one textbook author who attended, but asked not to be named. "They also knew that something had to be done about beginning grade school reading, but they weren't sure what. The only big concern was over the older grades."

Mel Grubb, now director of Cal State Dominguez Hill's California Literature Project, had just completed his doctorate paper on how children respond to literature, and several participants say that he was so keen on his theories and so excited about the group's power to change things for the better that his views often predominated.

"The group was charting new ground, and we wanted an inspirational document," recalls Jerry Treadway, a non-voting committee member, author for Holt, Rinehart & Winston, and a professor at San Diego State. "I remember specific meetings at which Mel Grubb and other whole language proponents convinced everyone that there was no distinction between learning how to read as a first-grader, and the way a mature reader would handle the printed word. We decided that until we got kids to deal with language the way it is used by adults, as a whole thought, our reading programs wouldn't work."

Outside the insular debates of the committee, a revolution was brewing in the classrooms that would soon work its way into their talks. Whole language gurus like Ken and Yetta Goodman, professors at the University of Arizona, were selling the romantic notion that childhood reading was a "natural" act which was being repressed by teachers hooked on low-level issues like word recognition, letters and sounds. Whole language, the Goodmans and others claimed, was a smash in New Zealand--but no rigorous evaluation of that country's grade school reading levels had been conducted. They instead relied

heavily upon their own poorly tested ideas, as well as the beliefs of theorists such as Frank Smith, whose book, "Reading Without Nonsense", urged teachers not to "interfere" with a child's learning of reading. "There are no rules of reading," Smith wrote, insisting that small children don't need phonics skills to "identify words they have not met in print before" and that "spelling has nothing to do with reading."

Unfortunately, whole language theorists were promoting such beliefs without the benefit of controlled studies or methodologically accepted research. According to articles published in 1995 by the respected American Federation of Teachers, to date, no meaningful research has ever verified their claims. "The movement's anti-science attitude forces research findings into the backroom," the Federation's articles noted. Ominously, the Federation noted, the primary tenet of whole language philosophy, that learning to read is akin to learning to speak, "is accepted by no responsible linguist, psychologist or cognitive scientist in the research community."

Nevertheless, Treadway remembers how whole language thinking overtook California's framework committee discussions. "We underwent a real interesting perceptual shift in the meetings, and what we finally stated, almost derisively, is that in the traditional reading approach, the emphasis is on mere accuracy," Treadway says. "We said, 'How absurd it is to care about individual words and accuracy!' Under whole language, the rule was efficiency of the mind: Get the meaning using the least perception possible. Skip words. Absorb ideas instead. At the time, it sounded great."

But tension began to arise over draft language that soft pedaled the need to teach basic reading skills. At one point, Elfrieda Hiebert, an author on reading, cautioned the group about relying on "gut feelings." The noted Harvard researcher and author Jean Chall met with Honig, spelling out her key findings about how grade school children actually learn to read--by the careful decoding of each and every letter, sound and word, until it can be done seamlessly and without effort. According to the textbook author who has asked not to be named, Honig told relayed to the framework committee Chall's concern that, "given the number of at-risk children in California who faced a possible lifetime as poor readers, we were playing with fire by dropping the teaching of specific reading skills. But Chall's findings were completely ignored."

One day, then-state curriculum official Francine Alexander made a well-received presentation in which she urged the group to seek statewide adoption of storybooks similar to the Impressions series from Holt Canada, which were filled with literature instead of traditional reading text. The group quickly warmed to Alexander's proposal. "We all said, how could we have been such fools?" recalls Treadway. "Of course if we give children great literature, fascinating stories, and wonderful tales, it will stimulate them to read."

Once the core idea of using storybooks rather than textbooks swept through, Treadway says, "phonics became a huge scapegoat. The secondary teachers were saying, 'Hey, you grade school guys are killing these kids' interest in learning with all your obsession with phonics.' And the elementary teachers on the committee bought into that, because they

really loved the literature books and were bored by the old primers. What we forgot is that a lot of California teenagers do hate high school, and they do hate reading, but it's due to a whole host of social, economic and psychological reasons. It's not solely because of the first grade."

Another powerful influence came into play about the same time. According to Cal State Chico's Cortez, some Latinos, Asians and blacks on the committee began to complain that California's emphasis on basic skills had left minority children behind, because most teachers required the mastery of one skill before a child could learn the next. Students who did not master the initial skills had to keep revisiting them.

"We felt that these kids, especially kids who did not speak English, never got around to the actual writing," says Cortez. "We felt we had to kind of reverse that and focus first on the meaning of a story and on a child's own writing, and worry about pronunciation and sounds and spelling later. That's where invented spelling came from. There was a lot of discussion about what we should do about all the parents who were adamant about having their children learn to spell. We decided we had to educate these parents about how children really learn, which is by miscuing and review."

UNFORTUNATELY, important research was at that moment re-confirming that just the reverse was true about how children learn to read.

Reading scholar Marilyn Adams was completing a book, "Beginning to Read", which detailed widespread findings that small children have a tough time with the "miscue and review" method, which encourages a child to guess at words from context, then learn later by revising their errors. "Science has consistently, firmly and indisputably refuted these hypotheses," Adams wrote. The new research confirmed a huge body of studies from the 1960s through 1980s, which showed that grade schoolers must very directly and clearly be shown how to decode and sound out each letter and word on their own. Without being explicitly and systematically taught that basic ability, the studies said, all but the most exceptional children were doomed to a long struggle with the printed page.

Honig says he assumed that everyone on the committee agreed with the years of weighty research, and that it "went almost without saying" that children in kindergarten through third grade needed to be taught traditional decoding skills. But ultimately, the committee ignored this vast body of research. Looking back, Honig says, "it is the curse of all progressives, who control much of what happens in the field of education, that we are anti-research and anti-science, and we never seem to grasp how irrational that attitude is. This is probably our deepest failure."

Grubb, of the California Literature Project, the most aggressive of the state's whole language groups, defends the lack of interest in reading research. "I don't mean to be defensive about the framework, but it was a philosophical document," says Grubb, who still insists teachers needn't spend very much classroom time on phonics or word decoding. "We didn't even cite researchers. It was philosophizing about making sense of one's world by using literature, and it promoted the idea that skills be taught to kids in the

context of exploring literature, not from separate how-to books. It never said don't use phonics. It told teachers to look at the research about phonics on their own, and apply it wisely."

In the end, the committee produced a thick document that was adopted by the state Board of Education and praised nationally on talk shows. Official textbooks were selected that were mostly literature; the book chosen by most California school districts contained no traditional reading lessons at all. Schools were expected to follow the new approach, and district "compliance officers" began appearing in local classrooms.

The late 1980s and early 1990s were a heady times for whole language. In California alone, an estimated 20,000 teachers took in-service classes or learned the new approach from mentors. Others paid \$650 to private trainers like Bob and Marlene McCracken, just two of a contingent of consultants who swarmed California. Expectations grew so high that several other states copied California without awaiting the outcome. They snapped up the hot new Houghton Mifflin storybook, whose teacher's manual did not contain a single traditional lesson in how to read, and whole language swept across much of the country, popping up in Texas, Washington, Florida, Ohio, North Carolina, Maryland and numerous other areas. (In Massachusetts, educators caught up in the whole language phenomenon have proposed a new reading framework that is virtually identical to California's disastrous plan, prompting 40 professors at Harvard and MIT to sign a petition urging the state to reject the proposal. Pointing to California's reading crisis, the scholars are demanding that Massachusetts not repeat such a debacle.)

At California's 72 teacher colleges, meanwhile, a near-religious fervor took hold. Whole language purists like Barbara Flores at Cal State San Bernardino peddled the idea, via teacher credentialing classes, that teaching phonics and other skills directly and systematically to children was actually bad for them. According to teachers who were trained at Cal State Northridge, Cal State San Bernardino, USC and other California colleges, the reading methodology course was reduced to a "child-centered" discussion dominated by whole language ideas. By 1995, some 10,000 fresh new teachers had poured into California grade schools, thousands of whom had no idea how to teach beginning reading. Recalls Treadway: "People like Barbara Flores said the child must learn phonics largely on his or her own. The purists became convinced that the black squiggles on a page would begin to make sense to kids while teachers taught larger ideas."

SIGNS OF TROUBLE emerged immediately, but a smattering of early complaints were laid to mere start-up wrinkles. A few uninformed parents telephoned their schools, angry that their children were creating such nonsense words as "ppdgz" because teachers were refusing to explain how to spell or sound-out words like "puppy dogs." Baffled parents were assured that "invented spelling" was part of a whole language approach that had made New Zealand the most literate country in the world. Children who grew frustrated or fell behind because the teacher was preventing them from sounding out their letters were labeled by reading specialists as "slow readers" or "learning disabled."

But one very concerned--and highly influential--grandmother didn't buy those answers. Marion Joseph, chief policy analyst under former state Superintendent Wilson Riles, visited a grade school one spring day with her daughter to pick up her grandson's reading primer for the upcoming fall. But the women were told: "We don't do primers anymore."

As Joseph recalls it, "The teacher showed us a truly beautiful storybook by Houghton Mifflin, like a book you'd have at home. And I said, 'But where are the lessons? My grandson doesn't know these words.' And my daughter asked, 'Can the other kids read this book?' And the teacher said, 'Some can, some can't.' So we said, 'Well, how will you teach the kids who can't?' And we just got this blank stare from the teacher. I realized then, we're in big trouble."

Joseph, on the board of a non-profit training and policy group, the California Institute for School Improvement, began a months-long process of talking to educators to find out what was happening in the schools. "I got, almost without exception: 'Oh my God, Marion, we are having a terrible time. The new reading method is not working.'" Teachers related tales to Joseph in which, "if they tried to teach phonics or word attack skills to the kids who weren't getting it from the storybook and the invented writings, bureaucrats came in from their district office and ordered a stop to it. It was terrible stuff, virtually a new religion, a cult."

Joseph, perplexed over "what the heck his damn framework was trying to do," met with Honig to share her concerns. But Honig was reluctant to believe that Joseph's strange anecdotes were anything but isolated events. Honig had other problems to worry about, facing an investigation for approving a state public-private partnership with a foundation run by his wife.

Recalls Honig, "My only thought was, 'Marion just can't be right.'" But Honig began to talk to other educators, and slowly discovered that his reading framework was being grossly misapplied in local schools. "I realized that Ken and Yetta Goodman and others were saying that kids can guess their way into reading, and the districts were buying it," says Honig. "What a disservice to kids. We figured it out after a year, and we tried to correct it. But we were just completely unprepared for how strong the movement was, and how many teachers believed they would be fired if they didn't comply. We never once told the districts to go whole language, whole-hog."

In 1991, Honig tried to get the state Department of Education to make a midstream correction by publishing a pro-skills guide for teachers. But state officials, swept up in national accolades being bestowed upon them as "visionaries," were utterly enamored of whole language. They instead produced "Ready, Set, Read", a mere recitation of whole language philosophy. "We were sabotaged," Honig says today. Moreover, there were no state reading scores, because Gov. Deukmejian had discontinued the so-called CAP tests. As a result, Honig could not prove that kids were actually being hurt by whole language.

Says Joseph: "Once there were no state test scores, the issue of how children were doing went off the press's screen, and whole language got terrific press. And then the officials began to believe their own press."

In 1992, Honig was convicted of conflict of interest charges involving his wife's foundation and was forced from office in January of 1993. But he and Joseph continued their fight from outside. Joseph recalls a particularly surreal meeting at which she and Honig tried to warn Honig's former deputy about the anti-skills hysteria overtaking the schools. "This former deputy just kept repeating this mantra about what Bill Honig had intended for California," she recalls. "Bill was sitting right there, beseeching him, saying no, no, no you've got it wrong. So nothing moved."

In the end, a rudderless group of state officials were left struggling to interpret a unique and untested reading philosophy which they, themselves, did not understand. At the schools, deep divisions broke out as district bureaucrats began dictating bizarre orders to teachers and principals.

At Toland Way Elementary School in Los Angeles's Eagle Rock District, the battle lines were drawn in 1992 when frustrated teachers and administrators decided to raise funds for spelling books by holding nacho sales and seeking parent donations. No spelling book had been approved by the state under the 1987 framework, meaning that no state funds could be used to buy spellers.

"Some parents were really upset that we had to ask for money," recalls Janet Davis, a mentor teacher and whole language proponent who now believes "fanatics" took over the state's whole language program. Says Davis: "The parents were saying, 'Why on earth isn't the district providing you the spelling books?' The district came down and just read us the riot act about that."

But the real pressure came later, when a group of LAUSD "compliance officers" came into Toland Way's classrooms for three days. "We got written up for using spelling books," says Davis. "A huge controversy ensued. But we still have our nacho sales and buy our books. I don't use them, but teachers who find them effective must be allowed to use them, for God's sake. I've been joking that Toland Way will be said by district officials to be suffering a statistical anomaly when we are tested on spelling, because our kids will know how to spell and other schools won't."

At Heliotrope Elementary School in Maywood, a Los Angeles suburb, teacher Patty Abarca became notorious for defying her school's ban on spelling tests and basal readers. Her war began in the early 1990s, when a now-departed vice principal, a hardcore whole language purist with little teaching experience, announced that teachers who were using traditional reading primers were "losers." Says one teacher who asked not to be named, "She said our reading program, and this is the word she used--'sucked'."

When school officials threatened to punish the veteran Abarca by transferring her to another school for defying orders and fomenting staff dissent, Abarca, a union activist,

merely shut her door. Says Abarca, "I wasn't ashamed to say that Dick and Jane is a wonderful story about a boy and girl and their neighborhood. And children love it."

But Abarca watched in dismay as inexperienced teachers at her school and in neighboring schools became swept up in the new method. Recalls Abarca, "I will never forget these two brand-new, first-grade teachers who seemed competent but didn't have a clue how to teach reading. One of them had not been taught a single reading method in college, so I said, 'You need the basal. It has a teacher's guide that will give you the basics.' And, incredibly, she said, 'What is a teacher's guide?' When I told her, she shook her head and said, 'No, no, we can only use literature to teach children to read. The vice principal says so.'"

Perhaps in a state less fascinated with trying to lead the nation in "innovation," education officials might have been sufficiently alarmed by such incidents to rescind the reading framework. But instead, in 1992, when the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) announced that California's reading scores were among the worst in the nation, state education officials were dumbfounded. The fourth-graders who'd been tested had spent four years learning to read under the popular new framework. What had gone wrong?

In response, a meeting of top state curriculum officials was called in 1993. There, whole language "true believers"--including the powerful California Reading Association, California Literature Project and several state officials--successfully deflected an attempt to re-emphasize basic skills in gradeschools. According to those who attended, state education officials Dennis Parker and Fred Tempest argued that teachers would "go nuts" if asked to make another big change in reading methodology. Teachers, they insisted, merely needed time to absorb whole language's unusual techniques.

But several months later, in 1994, new NAEP scores were again announced, and the scope of California's reading debacle was fully revealed. Gradeschool reading levels were in a freefall, with California 4th graders beating only Louisiana and Guam. "The 1994 test scores finally got everyone's attention," says Honig. "The leaders in suits finally began to realize that they'd been sold a bill of goods."

At the same time, word spread that the National Institutes of Health was completing a \$25 million longitudinal series of studies of gradeschoolers--the most extensive research of reading ever conducted by the U.S.--which definitively showed that small children don't pick up reading anymore "naturally" than anthropologists learn to decipher hieroglyphics or Marines figure out the Morse code. According to research director Reid Lyon, the study found that in normal children the eye "decodes" every single letter, then melds the letters into sounds and words so effortlessly that the process cannot be observed by the human eye. Indeed, Lyon says that the very speed of the decoding process is probably what caused California's whole language proponents to claim that the mind skips over and guesses words from context. Unfortunately, they used this misbegotten belief to insist that children were being forced into "unnatural" and "joyless" skills-based reading methods.

Says Lyon, "Fluent readers decode so fast that they don't even know they are tearing each word apart. It is unconscious and automatic. They spend all their time considering the meaning of what they read. But the converse is true for poor readers. Poor readers are bottled up at the data-in stage. They get only these teeny, lurching sounds as they read words. So to them, what the hell's a book? A book is a completely inaccessible object. We found that first-graders who aren't shown how to decode right away begin to feel stupid before the end of the first grade. It happens that fast."

ARMED WITH the 1994 scores and the NIH study, advocates of basic skills launched a philosophical war on reading. Honig and others got the ear of state Superintendent Delaine Eastin, who took office in 1995 and walked, unprepared, straight into the bitter controversy. Eastin created the Reading Task Force in May of 1995 to get to the bottom of the disaster.

But whole language ideologues quickly launched a public-relations counterattack. In published articles and at education conferences, whole language proponents attributed the bottomed-out reading scores to California's burgeoning population of immigrants, understocked school libraries, the national recession, and other non-curriculum factors. And they passionately attacked the NAEP test itself, arguing that whole language imparts such subtle skills to children that those skills cannot be measured, even by NAEP's widely respected mix of long, short, open-ended, and multiple-choice questions.

At USC, a hotbed of whole language theory, professor Jeff McQuillan attempted to deflect the blame being placed upon whole language by pointing to California's household income drop during the recession, an influx of immigrants, and increasingly inferior school libraries, while professor Stephen Krashen released a scathing satirical essay in which he urged the teaching of phonics to newborns. "Couples considering marriage may want to have their prospective partner screened for defective phonemic awareness," Krashen scoffed. The purists angrily accused the California Department of Education of failing--despite millions of dollars spent on in-service training--to properly explain whole language to principals and teachers.

On the opposing side, however, a raft of pro-skills educators poured forth, emboldened after years of being dismissed as mere fossils. They convincingly pointed out that reading levels among California's white children had dropped to the absolute bottom for their racial group in the U.S.--even below white children in Louisiana--so claiming that the poor performance of Latino immigrants had skewed California's scores was not only cynical, it was dead wrong. And pro-skills advocates revealed that New Zealand--even to this day still much ballyhooed by Sacramento education officials--had not, in fact, benefitted from whole language. Indeed, one-quarter of that country's gradeschool children could not read, and needed costly tutors. New Zealand, deeply embarrassed by its reading crisis, has begun a discomfiting internal debate. Meanwhile, an international study found that New Zealand actually lagged behind the U.S. in gradeschool reading ability, despite its widely repeated claim that it was the "most literate" country in the world.

"It turned out that New Zealand was behind us," says Honig, "so we had to ask, why on earth are we copying them?"

Treadway, the professor at San Diego State, recently became the most prominent whole language proponent to publicly concede that whole language theory was fundamentally wrong for teaching beginning reading, even while some of its techniques, such as using rich literature and early childhood writing, were good ideas that should be retained.

"In my mind," says Treadway, "we cast our eyes across the Pacific to such an extent that we ignored the findings in our own country, which said New Zealand was wrong. We felt, rather smugly, that American scientists merely had not caught up with us. We were very proud and maybe even self-righteous. We had real strong conversations with people who agreed with us from New Zealand. We validated one another in the most insular way. It was a basic, self-affirming, life affirming way to go. I don't mind saying it has been a disaster, as long as it's clear to everyone that it was done with the best of intentions by a lot of really committed people."

Now the officials, consultants and scholars are sitting down in Sacramento to try to fix the mess they've created. According to Honig, at gradeschools in fad-driven areas where administrators went "whole language, whole hog," up to 30% of the children now need tutors and special intervention to catch up, and many of those schools are using extremely scarce funds to herd children into the lavishly expensive Reading Recovery tutoring system. "Officials in Sacramento and places like L.A. County are still saying beginning readers can pick up their reading skills in the context of a story, while absorbing whole ideas," says Honig. "It's like watching doctors bleed their patients."

The internal resistance to reform by whole language proponents has delayed state implementation of the new reading plan backed by the Task Force, and its prospects remain unclear. In fact, high-placed whole language proponents are spreading the word to whole language purists in local districts that they "can ignore" whatever the state decides, according to several sources. Nevertheless, proponents still expect that the state will approve a plan that, while retaining some use of literature and early childhood writing, will heavily emphasize word decoding and word attack skills through the second grade, with two hours per day devoted to reading lessons.

Douglas Carnine, the Oregon scholar who is advising Eastin, warns that even though her proposals are solid, teachers, like any professional group, cannot absorb continual, massive change without creating an inferior product. "California," Carnine says, "is going to suffer terribly with its continuing addiction to massive innovation. I don't know if they can see what is obvious: that California is the first to innovate, and the first to fail. They don't understand the nature of change theory. California has got to slow down. Let individual schools pick what works and prove it to their community with test scores and visible, non-fuzzy, measurable achievements. Stop trying to fix the whole damn world and end up failing to fix a single school."

Moreover, the state's teacher colleges continue to reject the vast body of research into beginning reading, and are expected to stubbornly resist altering their badly deficient reading methodology courses for new teachers, experts say. In response, the state is trying to reform its official teacher certification reading requirements, thus forcing the colleges to change their ways. But that effort has only just begun.

Meanwhile, California's gradeschool teachers are left to pick up the pieces from what has been an unpleasant, close-up battle in the classroom. At schools where administrators fought their teachers, ordering them around like naive children, it will take a long time to repair the damage to fragile, internal school cultures that tend to thrive upon mutual respect, but wither under authoritarianism.

Many teachers are beginning to choose what works best for them and shrug off the worst aspects of whole language. At Toland Way Elementary School in Eagle Rock, for example, Janet Davis remains committed to the use of rich literature, invented spelling, personal journals and other techniques of whole language, but she has made concessions to traditional skills. "If phonics worked so friggin' well, do you think we would have stopped doing it?" she asks. "Older teachers were successful with a large percentage of students using their old way of teaching, but there were always kids who did not benefit. But then we lost what the old teachers knew by being so radical, and we started losing those kids too."

Davis now creates her own spelling tests--over the objections of the anti-spelling LAUSD. And, as a mentor teacher, she has given her younger apprentice an old basal reader to show her how to teach basic skills.

Not far away, at Los Feliz Elementary, in a first-grade ESL classroom, teacher Patricia Franco Simonowski uses a traditional reading approach with heavy homework and lots of repetition. Simonowski is one of the apparently few teachers who has read Honig's reading framework in detail. She keeps it in her classroom, where she periodically pulls it out and pores over it in disgust.

"I don't think many teachers have actually benefitted from reading this thing," says Simonowski, pointing to a page of the framework. "I tried out these concepts, and I see this framework for what it is: a jobs program for tutors, reading consultants and child psychiatrists. Give me a child who has been taught simple discipline at home, and I will use what we all know about teaching reading to give you a child who can read and write fluently." She has taught fifth and sixth grades at other Los Angeles schools, and she has seen dozens of non-reading older kids--all victims, she believes, of overzealous whole language concepts. For older children, Simonowski says--and most educators agree--it is already too late. "It's pitiful out there, and I blame the experts and the textbook companies who make big bucks every time California figures out a whole new way to teach reading."

Asked about the state's new reform plan, Simonowski dismisses Eastin and Honig with a wave of her hand. "Teachers and kids," she says, "have become sitting ducks."

Eastin and Honig appear to be aware that teachers like Patty Simonowski, Patty Abarca and Janet Davis feel twice bitten and remain wary of any new state-driven ideas. But the two leaders--one the ultimate government insider, the other now a respected outsider--are upbeat about the state's plan and its eventual acceptance in the classroom. This time, they say, the state is going forward with its eyes open, fully informed, research in hand.

"The new plan," says Honig, "is a huge improvement over what's been done for the last several years."

One can only hope that he's right. Because that, of course, is what the visionaries said the last time.

Credits

Jill Stewart, a contributing editor for Buzz Magazine, the Los Angeles Times Magazine and LA Weekly, wrote this article for LA Weekly.