

# YES, A BALANCED APPROACH BUT LET'S GET IT RIGHT!

*Janet Kierstead*

I began making the annual pilgrimage to the Claremont Reading Conference as a primary teacher in the mid 1970's. Change was in the air then – as now. The highly structured, direct instructional practices of the “back-to-basics” era were giving way to talk of personalized, child-centered methods which would allow students to learn by doing – to acquire skills by using them for real-life purposes. Concerned about lagging achievement levels, especially among the increasing population of non-English speaking students, the California Department of Education (CDE) had just launched the Early Childhood Education Program. It was designed to encourage teachers to leave the skill-drill, teach-test methods behind and adopt a more “natural” approach, based on children's own language and interests.

Encouraged by CDE reform efforts, many of us had cast aside the Janet and Mark basal readers so popular at the time. Instead, we were experimenting with ways to move students into reading by first showing them their “talk written down” and then helping them write it for themselves—while at the same time exposing them to good children's literature and using trade books as their reading material. We called it the language experience approach to literacy, and the Claremont Reading Conference was our home.

Since its establishment by Peter Lincoln Spencer in 1938, the conference had been the center for such ideas. Spencer had the idea that reading was a generic form of behavior, namely that, as in our normal use of language, we can say that we read many things. He saw print reading as one item in that panoply. But he did not get into methodology; instead, he left it to the teacher to figure out what his ideas might look like in the classroom. Presumably, the conference was his vehicle for facilitating that work. By the time I began attending, it was a highly regarded gathering place for some of the best-known and

respected leaders of reading theory and practice within the nation and abroad. The Claremont Reading Conference was where classroom teachers struggling to translate the new ideas into practice could rub shoulders with those conducting the research and formulating the theories to lead the way.<sup>1</sup>

It was an exciting time. “The law” was on our side, but most educators were resisting the latest educational reform that we so enthusiastically embraced. So we had a mission. Back at our individual schools, most of us were working alone to develop the practical strategies needed for success with this complex approach. At best, our fellow teachers at school viewed us as suspect and at worst, as a threat to the status quo. So we needed the Claremont conference both as a place to exchange ideas and a way to maintain the courage to continue the struggle.

In the ensuing years, many educators did move away from back-to-basics — but as so often happens, many went too far, adopting a laissez-faire approach that left far too much to chance. Little or no phonics instruction began to replace meaningless drill of letters and sounds in isolation. New crops of beginning readers began to falter — this time due to too little structure, rather than too much — too little help with spelling/phonics, the writing conventions, and too little guidance for moving into books. Many teachers apparently began to believe that merely exposing children to good literature would be sufficient to ensure their success, that anything more than occasionally pointing out the sound-symbol relationship in passing would hinder what they saw as a natural, but fragile, process of learning to read.

Shortly after devising what I considered to be a balanced approach in my own classroom, I left the classroom to enter the doctoral program at The Claremont Graduate School. At the same time, with the Early Childhood Education program well underway, CDE asked me to help move their reform efforts into the middle school and the high school levels. So, for several years, as a consultant to CDE, my focus shifted from beginning reading/language arts to helping upper elementary and secondary teachers design interdisciplinary, project-based curriculum.

While still busy in this other arena, in the mid 1980's I began to notice that something was amiss in the field of reading/language arts. Phonics was becoming such a taboo subject that I soon learned not to mention it in my occasional meetings with specialists within CDE or with their counterparts in the field. During my reunions with colleagues from my Claremont days, I began to hear echoes of my own concerns: things were going too far. The laissez-faire approach was not providing enough structure to allow children to bridge the gap between oral and written language. Too many were "failing" to make the leap across the divide. It was only a matter of time until another violent reaction would set in.

And here it is. From the highest levels the call has gone out again for change, and this time the reform is mandated and very specific. Recent state and national legislation<sup>2</sup> establishes strict new guidelines for reading instruction, requiring the direct instruction of phonics, isolated from context. A change that was introduced as a balanced approach in California in 1996 now, as spelled out in Assembly Bill 1086, requires systematic, explicit phonics instruction that is not embedded in context, and specifies that decodable text be used for reading instruction. School districts wishing to use state funds to support reading programs must use only staff development programs that have been state approved according to guidelines which includes the following definitions:

"Systematic explicit phonics instruction" means an organized, sequential program in which letter-sound correspondence for letters and letter clusters are directly taught and blended, practiced in words, word lists, and word families, and practiced in "decodable text," (sic) "Decodable text" means reading material in which a high percentage of words are linked to phonics lessons. Systematic explicit phonics instruction builds from basic elements to complex patterns and teachers provide prompt and explicit feedback. Systematic explicit phonics instruction does not mean "embedded phonics instruction" which is ad hoc instruction in phonics based on a random selection of sound and word elements.<sup>3</sup>

This latest reform is well intentioned. But it is an over-reaction, and the inherent dangers are obvious to those who have been through this

before. No distinction is being made between child-centered, natural approaches and laissez-faire. So, current reformers reject natural approaches without making a careful analysis of what they involve. Such approaches teach sound-symbol relationships, *as children need them* to sound out and spell the words they are using *to communicate their ideas*. Without taking a close look, it can appear that helping children to learn phonics in context and in the sequence needed for their daily writing is haphazard and unpredictable. But this simply need not be the case, as I will explain later in detail.

For now, I will make just one more comment about the guidelines. Writing is not recognized in the guidelines as playing a significant role in learning to read, when quite the opposite is true. Without seeing writing as the means of developing a firm foundation in phonics, that leaves memorizing phonics in isolation and hoping for transfer to reading.

But that practice did not work for so many children before. So, why would we think — especially given our increasingly diverse student population — that it would serve them well now? The choice need not be *either* phonics out of context *or* laissez-faire. Either extreme makes learning to read much more difficult for children than it need be — one putting up barriers, the other leaving gaps too difficult for many children to overcome. Neither capitalizes on the child's inherent drive to communicate in increasingly complex ways. There is an alternative.

What's needed is an appropriate balance between the two — what can be thought of as a “child-friendly” approach. Such an approach incorporates phonics instruction into structured daily writing activities that allow children to build upon what's familiar to them — their own thoughts, feeling and speech. It provides enough guidance to systematically develop spelling/phonics and other prerequisite skills, setting high standards for quality at each step along the way. Yet, it is personalized so that children are writing about what is of special interest to them, and thus it does not interfere with their natural enthusiasm for communicating their ideas. It follows a logical sequence and is individualized to allow for comfortable pacing, so that it is virtually fail-safe. With the appropriate balance between structure and freedom, children build a foundation from which they launch effortlessly into reading. Let's look at both why and how this happens.

### **Why and How a Balanced, “Child-Friendly” Approach Works**

With today’s over-emphasis on phonics and direct instruction – and the corresponding pressure on teachers to show test results – we can easily lose sight of our purpose. So first, let’s clarify our task. Are we teaching children phonics? Are we teaching children to read? Or, should we be viewing our challenge as something different from either of those?

I sometimes walk into classrooms where most of the children have mastered “phonics.” They get high marks on phonics tests. They can, in the words of Veatch, “hiss, spit and bark” accurately at print. But they can do little or nothing with the new set of associations. They can neither read (make meaning from print), nor write down their thoughts in a way that others can readily interpret. Acquired out of context, the sound-symbol relationship is useless to them. Our purpose, then, is not simply to teach phonics in isolation, and test scores that show that we have are meaningless. But neither are we teaching reading. For helping children learn to read is not something we do *to them*, any more than we teach them to walk and talk. Fortunately, our job is much easier and more doable than that. For in reality, *we are helping children continue a process they have already begun.*

### **How Far Can Children Go On Their Own?**

Once we give up the notion that reading is an alien task — something new we must present in bits and pieces — and take a closer look, we see that actually all we need do is support children as they continue an effort they began at birth. For in infancy, they began a dual process: communication (transmitting information) and reading (interpreting facial expression, gesture, touch, etc. ). By the time they present themselves to us in the primary grades, they have come quite a long way, made a great deal of progress along this path on their own for several years.

First, consider communication. Children move through what can be viewed as a series of spheres of communication as they learn to transmit their thoughts and feelings. (See Figure 1.) From birth, the infant uses body language (lunging, smiling, etc.) and the crying sounds with which

we are all too familiar. Over time, the toddler begins to develop speech, which is then followed by scribbling (this *says* "cat") and drawing (this *is* a cat). The final sphere is writing. Here, we must intervene. Children need help in unlocking the secret of communication through print — help in knowing that adults use certain symbols (letter sequences, punctuation, types of lettering/fonts, etc.) to represent the sounds, cadence and emphasis of meaning heretofore transmitted through words, body language, and inflection.

Now, consider reading. Children's reading ability grows naturally from birth as well. Very early on, infants learn to read the face, tone of voice, and body language of those around them. Preschoolers "read," or more accurately at this stage, they "recognize" the McDonald's arches, traffic signs, and the Nordstrom and Macy's signs at the mall. Up to this point, the child's increased awareness comes naturally, just from incidentally associating the symbols or written names with those places and things. From there forward, however, someone must directly intervene.

### **What Do Children Need From Us?**

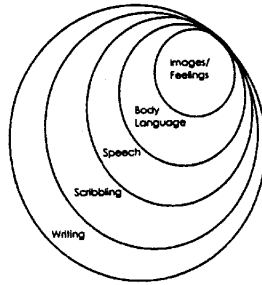
First, they need to know that talk can be written down. If they have not watched someone write notes, make grocery lists, compose letters from them to Grandma and the like, they must experience such things in school. So in the beginning stages, both within the total group and individually, the teacher will need to write down their self-selected words and sentences for them and help them "read" them back. This quickly gives them the idea of what print is all about.

Next they need to discover that certain letters represent the sounds in their own speech and that the clumps of sounds they make are represented by groups of letters (words), with spaces (the infamous "two fingers") in-between. Eventually, they will notice that the same word looks and is spelled the same from place to place, whether it appears in their own writing or that of their friends.

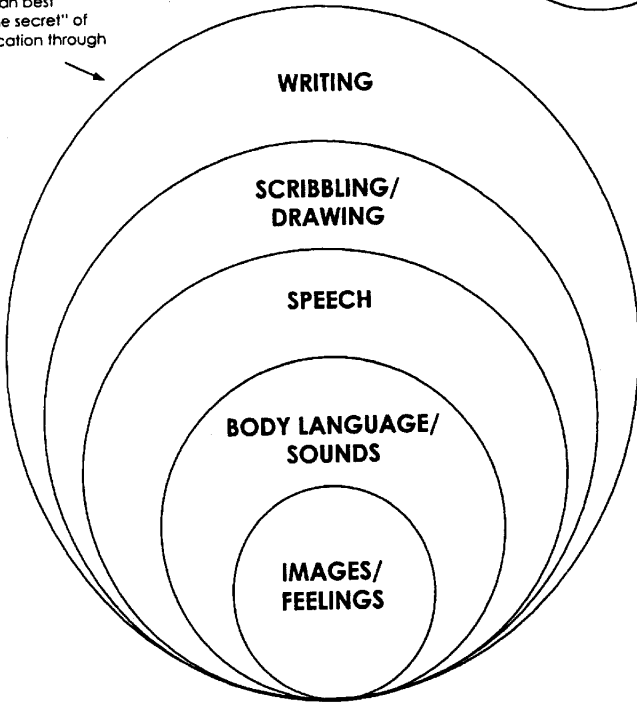
# Writing, Reading and the Natural Progression of Communication

— Figure 1 —

As children develop, their attempts to communicate "grow" naturally from the inside out:



**Writing** is where children can best "unlock the secret" of communication through print.



**Reading** is reaching over into someone else's writing sphere to interpret their ideas. It occurs spontaneously — evolves — as children develop their own writing sphere.

No controlled, “decodable readers” need be contrived, for children are writing their own decodable readers, since they use a fairly controlled vocabulary when they speak. Even before they begin to write their own simple sentences, and just from “reading back” their own dictation, they will have learned to recognize the verbs, pronouns, and simple connecting words that appear repeatedly in their speech. Later, if someone helps them figure out which letters are needed to spell unfamiliar words each time they write, they will also learn to “sound out” words for their writing—the foundation skill needed to sound out unfamiliar words in their reading. By this stage they still are not yet reading in the way we commonly refer to it. But they are getting close. Eventually they will not only notice that when their classmates write about the same subject, they use the same printed words, but that the same is true of children’s books. Slowly but surely, in this fail-safe and apparently effortless way, *reading evolves from a structured writing process.*

Teachers have devised a variety of ways to structure a child-friendly approach so that children can make these discoveries without dampening their natural enthusiasm and creativity. What follows is an example from my own classroom.

#### **An Example of a Child-Friendly Writing Process: “The Steps”**

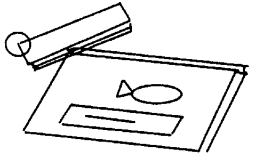
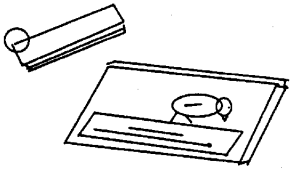
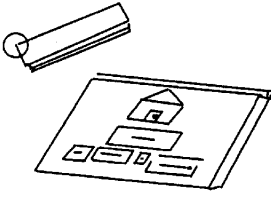
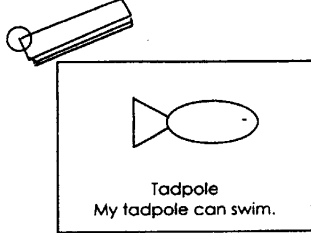
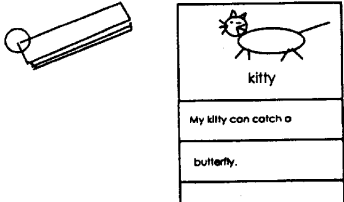
I worked for several years in my own K - 2 classroom in a small rural school in Southern California, where forty percent of my children were from the families of the migrant farm workers and came to me speaking only Spanish. Usually their parents were illiterate, and so they had no experience with print. The rest of the class came from the shopkeepers, landowners, or professionals who had moved out to enjoy the country life. They often had a rich foundation in reading skills, and they spoke only English. So it was not unusual for the reading levels in the class to range from virtually zero (one year, a child came speaking no language at all) to reading at the sixth grade level. So I had to develop an individualized program which supported each child at the appropriate developmental level and provided for very different backgrounds in language and life experience.



**Developmentally Sequenced "Steps" Toward Writing/Reading\***

— Figure 2 —

The "Steps" activities accompany "Key Words" and incorporate **SYSTEMATIC, EXPLICIT PHONICS INSTRUCTION** from Step 2 forward:

<p><b>Step 1 (Phonemic awareness begins here.)</b> Child dictates "key word." Child glues copy.</p> 	<p><b>Step 2 (Phonics begins here.)</b> Child dictates word and sentence. Child glues copy.</p> 
<p><b>Step 3</b> Child dictates, cuts up, reassembles and glues.</p> 	<p><b>Step 4</b> Child dictates and copies into book.</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">Tadpole My tadpole can swim.</p>
<p><b>Step 5</b> Child dictates word only and "builds" a sentence.</p>  <p style="text-align: center;">kitty</p> <p>My kitty can catch a</p> <p>butterfly.</p>	<p><b>Step 6</b> Child writes alone, with no key word. Child applies and extends writing and reading to the content areas.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Mini Projects</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Action-Based Projects</p>

\*Developed in the classroom of Janet Kierstead.

I devised an approach which incorporated phonics into an individualized writing program that moved emergent readers into trade books. For the writing program, I developed a sequence of six increasingly complex activities based on Ashton-Warner's Key Vocabulary. I came to refer to those activities as "The Steps." They are described below. (See Figure 2.)

### ***Key Vocabulary***

Each of the Steps activities begins by eliciting a "special," or "Key" word from the child. The teacher sits with each child individually talking about something of interest to that child until a special word comes forth (in the child's home language): *I want fish today because yesterday my mom let me pick out a gold fish at the pet shop. They put it in a plastic bag, and we took it home, and I get to keep it in a bowl in my room, and I have to feed it every day, etc.* The child watches as the adult writes the word on a "word card" made of heavy card stock. The child traces over the word with the index finger of the writing hand as the teacher watches for correct letter formation. The child punches a hole in the card and places it on a metal "word ring." The next day, if he/she can remember it, it stays on the ring. If not, the teacher says something like, *That wasn't a very good word for you, let's get a better one today,* and removes the card from the ring. The follow-up activity the child carries out for that word depends on which "Step" he/she has reached. Follow-up activities are described below.

***Step 1:*** The adult makes a duplicate of the special word and the child glues the copy into his/her "writing" book. The child draws a picture about the word and returns to the teacher to have the work checked. The child then receives a clothespin to pin on his/her shirt or blouse, signifying that work is complete. These are the "tickets" to recess. That gives them a sense of responsibility and completion, and it allows the teacher to make sure that each child has done what was expected during the writing period. This signal, along with carefully taught routines and procedures for carrying out the work and an extensive collection of self-teaching activities for children to engage in when finished early, frees up the teacher to work intensively with individuals.

At Step 1, then, the child is first learning —

- That written words are a means of communication
- Correct letter formation
- Use of the glue, pens, paper punch
- Responsibility for completing work and having it checked
- Responsibility for not disturbing others

Most children will remain at Step 1 for about one to three weeks (but longer at each subsequent Step), depending upon how long it takes for them to become comfortable with the procedure. Each day they “read” all the words from previous sessions and get a new word. Recall that the teacher will remove any that are not special enough to be remembered, but this seldom happens, as the word is the caption for a mind-picture of special importance to that child. This same basic procedure for getting a word is followed at each Step, with variations in the follow-up activity, as described below.

**Step 2:** While writing the word for the child, the adult now teaches the spelling for ONE of the sounds that will be needed. (More than one a day can be confusing.) The child then dictates a sentence about that word, and the teacher writes the sentence on the BACK of the word card: *I want “bird” today, ‘cause we put up a bird feeder in our back yard and now lots of birds come around and eat the seeds, and its really fun to watch ‘em ‘cause sometimes they fight over ‘em, and my daddy says, etc.* Again, the child watches as the teacher writes “bird” on the front of the card. Then the teacher helps the child trim down that long sentence to something easier to remember well enough to “read” back. This might be, *We put up a bird feeder in our back yard.* Again, the child watches at the adult writes.

At Step 2 the child is first learning —

- The spelling for simple sounds (usually just the consonants)
- That clumps of sounds are written as separate words
- The meaning of "sentence"
- That sentences begin with a capital letter and end with a period
- A few simple punctuation marks (,?)

Again the teacher makes a duplicate, the child glues it in, makes a picture, has it checked by the teacher, and receives a clothespin.

**Step 3:** Same procedure as in Step 2, but this time while the adult writes, the child helps supply the letters he/she knows, as well as learning one new spelling. Also, this time the duplicate is written by the teacher on a narrow strip of paper and the child cuts it up. Each word falls on the table out of order, the child scrambles them up and then reassembles and glues them to recreate the sentence.

At Step 3 the child is first learning —

- More complex spelling for sounds (the remaining consonants, some short vowels and perhaps a few digraphs, depending on what the child has already learned)
- Use of sound-symbol relationship and configuration as clues for identifying words
- Use of scissors

**Step 4:** Same procedure as before except that the child copies the sentence directly into the writing book.

At Step 4 the child is first learning —

- More complex spelling for sounds (remaining short vowels and digraphs, and perhaps long vowels by now, depending on what the child has already learned)
- To correctly form letters independently
- Use of lined paper (not always, but perhaps, depending on the child's motor skills)

**Step 5:** Same procedure as before, except now the adult only writes the word, and shows the child how to “build” a sentence from all the supporting materials on the classroom walls: charts of frequently used words; lists of special words for holidays, favorite foods, pets, and the like, brainstormed by the total group; charts of any songs or poems learned by the class; and a class “wall strip” dictionary hanging within easy reach and used for recording needed words (a set of 4” wide strips—one strip for each sound—cut lengthwise from chart paper of card stock, so they can be removed by the child, taken to an adult, and then replaced).

At Step 5 the child is first learning —

- More complex spelling for sounds (whatever spellings remain unfamiliar to the child by now)
- How to spell words by "sounding out"
- How to locate spelling for words when unable to sound them out
- Use of more sophisticated spellings as clue for identifying words

The first time, building a sentence will take the child as long as twenty minutes. But in a few days, he/she can write several sentences with ease, and moves on to Step 6.

**Step 6:** The child no longer gets a "special" word, and instead, writes long and complex stories and carries out projects related to math, science, or social studies. Children engage in two types of projects. One is a "Mini Project": Making a map of the classroom to scale, writing about it, and putting it on display; creating a three-dimensional model of an animal's habitat, writing about it and putting it on display; etc. Mini Projects are valuable as a way to apply and extend learning, but are simply demonstrations/exhibitions of what students know and can do.

The other type is an Action-Based Project: Making a map of the classroom to scale that shows how it might be rearranged to make room for a new interest area, writing a persuasive essay about the idea, presenting both to classmates and the teacher in an attempt to enlist their agreement for making the change; creating a model of an pet's habitat, writing a brochure describing the health, nutritional, grooming and exercise needs of the pet, and using both as part of a "Pet Fair" to teach other children how to better care for various animals. Action-Based Projects go beyond Mini Projects to persuade an *authentic audience* — here, the child is trying to make a positive difference in some aspect of the surrounding world. (See Figures 3 and 4 for examples of projects for older students.)

### Action-Based Projects For Older Students

--Figure 3--

Students have carried out such projects as those designed to—

- improve their diet—prepare for career goals
- keep younger students out of gangs
- keep drugs off campus—convince younger students to stay away from drugs
- reduce the serving and clean up time in the cafeteria
- make better use of the school parking lot—reduce time it takes to exit after school
- provide nutritious snacks at school—improve school lunches
- set up and run an accounting system to manage the high school academy's budget
- create a useful invention—design and market a new product
- establish and un a successful small business on campus (snack bar, a “special events” video service, help with research on the Internet, etc.)
- provide a community service for preschoolers—the elderly
- get others to better prepare for a disaster at school—at home
- reduce the waste generated on campus—graffiti on campus/in community

In an Action-Based Project, students select a problem, challenge, or task of particular interest to them related to a teacher-selected topic—and—try to “make a positive difference” through their own action and/or by enlisting the help of others.

## Project Example for Earth Science

— Figure 4 —

### “How can we get our family to conserve water at home?”

#### GATHER DATA (FACTS, OPINIONS IDEAS):

- Interview Family: “How do you think we could save water?”
- Read and Analyze: water bills — compute last 3 months
- Observe: how family brushes teeth, rinses dishes, washes car
- Interview Water and Power: Common ways people waste water and what might be done about it.
- Phone for pamphlets on water conservation strategies and order water saving devices

#### FORMULATE TENTATIVE PLAN AND GENERATE PRODUCTS:

- Pool ideas from others’ research
- Develop action-plan
- Prepare “sales pitch” for family, including background info and facts
- Make graphs and charts to show family: “Water usage observed in our home— compared with other homes.”
- Make checklist to gather commitment from family for who will do what (install/change behaviors)
- Make matrix chart to keep track of target behaviors

#### REVISE PLAN AND TAKE PERSONAL ACTION:

- Present plan and “sales pitch” to teacher, classmates and outside expert for feedback — revise as needed
- Present information and ideas to family — plan for installation of devices and gain commitment for change of target behaviors
- Routinely chart target behaviors
- Periodically pool findings with class and create updated charts showing comparison of how different families are doing.
- After 2 months: recheck water bills

**MEANWHILE, DOCUMENT PROCEDURE:** Keep a record of activities in a log book (including charts as they are created) and use them to create a factual report of what was done.

Possibilities include:

- sequential cartoons with captions (hand- or computer-drawn and written)
- narrated video tape
- a pamphlet of “How You Can Help Your Family Save Water,” and so forth

#### EVALUATE ENTIRE ENTERPRISE AND DECIDE WHAT TO DO NEXT:

- Present in class and get feedback on process and products
- Could use products already created -
  - to teach other classes how to do a similar project
  - to kick off a school water conservation project
  - to interest the community in water conservation

At Step 6 the child is first learning —

- How to transmit information of a more academic nature to others (to teach or persuade)
- The use of more complex punctuation ("\_\_\_" !)
- Responsibility for sustaining interest in and commitment to work lasting several days or weeks
- How to self-edit, present materials for peer and teacher review, and prepare written material for publication

***State Guidelines and Characteristics of This Program:*** Recall that state guidelines call for systematic, explicit phonics instruction, requiring that phonics be “directly taught” and practiced in “decodable text.” Also, phonics is not to be embedded in context — not to be random, or ad hoc. Ad hoc is defined in Webster’s as being “for the particular end or case at hand, *without consideration of wider application.*” (Emphasis mine.)

How, then, does the Steps example of a natural approach measure up against the guidelines? Taking each requirement in turn, we find a close match to virtually all of them. For phonics instruction within the Steps is—

- *direct instruction.* This may be a bit clouded, as there is often some confusion over direct instruction and *group presentation*, with some thinking that children must come together in a group to receive direct instruction. Actually direct instruction given individually to the child for some purpose in his/her work (in this case to communicate) is vastly more effective than that given in a group. For not only can the teaching be closely tailored to that child’s skill level, but it also is tied to the need to know something of importance to him/her. So, interest is high, and the child watches and listens carefully. The Steps therefore, provide a powerful version of direction instruction.
- *systematic.* Not only does the teacher keep track of what the child has learned, but introduces new sound-symbol relationships in a framework beginning with consonants and ending with digraphs and long vowels. It is only the *specific sequence of letters within the framework* that cannot be



predetermined, because that depends on what words the child needs to spell.

- practiced in *decodable texts*. As explained earlier, each child is writing his/her own decodable text, which is first a means of applying and later practicing the new learning by reading it back.
- *not ad hoc*. The learning will be *applied/used immediately and daily thereafter*. For children reread all their words daily, and since they tend to use similar language as they repeatedly talk about the things that interest them most, they will continue to apply the new learning as they create each day's new decodable text.

There is, however one glaring -- and quite intentional -- mismatch with the guidelines. *Phonics instruction within the Steps is embedded in context*. But is this really against what reformers are trying to accomplish? Reformers do not want instruction to be *ad hoc*, which we can only believe is because they do not want the teaching to be "without consideration for wider application." Introducing and practicing phonics *out of context* as called for in the guidelines, however, denies students the chance for immediate application. For, by definition, application can only occur embedded in context. Practice can take place out of context, but application -- no. So, it appears that reformers were forced into this position because they did not recognize the alternative available to them: the opportunity to use writing to develop the foundation skills children need for reading.

Let's think about this in another set of circumstances. Say you had a new set of several phone numbers of business associates, family and friends that you would like eventually to know from memory. Would you choose to spend several weeks memorizing them ahead of time--waiting that long before you used them to make calls to anyone? Or, would you rather rely on the list to make your daily calls, while at the same time focusing on learning maybe one or two new numbers each day--committing them to memory *while you made those calls among all the others*? Which way would be the most effective use of your time? Which appeals to you more? In which case would your learning be more

apt to “stick”—be available to you later for “wider application”? Further, think about all the other information you would miss learning if you delayed your actually calling for several weeks. While it is not an exact analogy, as I have attempted to illustrate here, children can learn a lot more than phonics from a carefully structured daily writing program.

Now consider an instance with children. We have all seen children, having practiced their spelling list diligently, get every word right on Friday’s spelling test—only to turn right around and misspell some of the same words in their writing. But as so many of us who work with children within a strong writing program have experienced, when children learn to spell new words *as they use them repeatedly in their writing*, they do not suddenly forget them later.

Again, memorizing phonics in isolation and hoping for transfer to reading did not work for so many children before. So, why would we think—especially given our increasingly diverse student population—that it would serve them well now? Our choice need not be *either* phonics out of context *or* laissez-faire. Either extreme makes learning to read much more difficult for children than it need be—one putting up barriers, the other leaving gaps too difficult for many children to overcome. Neither capitalizes on the child’s inherent drive to communicate in increasingly complex ways. Can we really afford to risk another generation of children while we discover this once again?

### **Two Other Ingredients in a Natural Approach: Total Group “Play” with Sounds and Letters—and Individual Reading Conferences**

While it is outside the scope of this paper to describe every aspect of a child-friendly, or natural, approach—of which mine is just one example—I do not wish to leave the reader with the impression that the daily writing activities and projects stand alone. At least three other ingredients deserve mention here. First is the total group activities devoted to what is currently being referred to as “phonemic awareness” (songs, chants, rhythms, phoneme substitution, etc.). Next is the *very light-handed treatment of occasional* group phonics activities designed to associate sounds with different combinations of letters (experimenting with letter substitution, building word families, and so forth). Finally, regularly scheduled individual reading conferences are essential. Here,

children who are reading independently (at about Step 5 and beyond) are shown how to select a trade book appropriate for their reading level and then required to keep a reading folder to document their work. (These including thoughts about the book, what they “got” out of it, difficult vocabulary encountered, dates they read independently or with a tutor, any project work that pertains to the book, etc.). These children meet individually with the teacher for a “reading conference” often enough to keep them practicing, enjoying and/or applying their reading to their project work. (The reader will find a more extensive description of these and other aspects of this approach in Kierstead, 1984 and 1990.)

### **Maintaining and Strengthening the Middle Ground**

One day, we will have gone beyond this latest swing of the pendulum as we have so many others, and advocates of the middle ground must be ready for that. Education has passed through several such swings in this century (Kierstead, 1987). Each time advocates of “child-centered/ progressive/ natural/ open-classroom” approaches—whatever the current terminology—have had their chance again, but somehow have been unable to get the message across. It is important for us to realize that it is now our responsibility to keep our eye on the ultimate goal. It falls to us now to maintain and strengthen the middle ground. We must see to it that we are ready when our chance comes again.

We cannot afford to throw up our hands in disgust and despair. Neither can we fight head-on the forces against us. It is simply a waste of our energy. But we can stand firm in our beliefs and practices. We can come together here at the annual conference, much as we did in the 1970’s, to exchange ideas and maintain our resolve. We can help one another refine practices that work and clarify how we might explain them to others. In so doing, we will not only have protected the children for whom we are responsible now, but we will be ready to share our work when the time comes. And never doubt that our chance will come again. It’s only a matter of time.

This, too, shall pass.

## Notes

1. Information about Spencer's ideas is from conversation with Malcolm Douglass. The Claremont Reading Conference journals are rich with the names of these leading educators, but the one who facilitated my understanding of these issues the most is Malcolm Douglass, Professor of Education, Claremont Graduate School, then Chairman of the conference.
2. Ken Goodman examines the development, contents, and implications of the national Reading Excellence Act (HR 2614, Senate-passed version) in Comments on the Reading Excellence Act (U.S.). (Reading on Line, International Reading Organization. Critical Issues: <http://www.readingonline.org/home.html>)
3. A summary of AB 1086 appears in Reading Instructional Development Program, Elementary Education. (California Department of Education, Reading/Language Arts. Application Materials for Providers of Professional Development in Reading: <http://www.cde.ca.gov/cilbranch/eltdiv/rdg99summary.htm>)

### ***Suggested Reading***

(T=Theoretical; A-R/P=Action-Research/Practical)

- Adams, M. (1990). *Beginning to Read*, The MIT Press. (T)
- Adams, M. (1992). *Modeling the Reading System: Four Processors, Theoretical Models, and Processes of Reading*, ed. Ruddell, et. al. Newark, DE: International Reading Assn., pp. 842-863. (T)
- Adams, M. (1991). "Why Not Phonics and Whole Language?" *All Language and the Creation of Literacy*, ed., William Ellis. Baltimore, MD: The Orton Dyslexia Society. (T)
- Adams, M. and Bruck, M. (Summer, 1995). "Resolving the Great Debate," *American Educator*, vol. 19, no. 2. (T)

Allington, R. and Cunningham, P. (1995). "Visiting in the Primary Classroom," *Schools That Work: Where All Children Read and Write*. NY: HarperCollins College Pub., pp. 225-231. (A-R/P)

Ashton-Warner, S. (1971). *Teacher*. NY: Bantam Books

Calfee, R. (1992). "Authentic Assessment of Reading and Writing in the Elementary Classroom," *Elementary School Literacy: Critical Issues*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon Pub., Inc., pp. 211-226. (A-R/P)

Kierstead, J. (1991). "A Day in the Life of an Integrated Language Arts Classroom," *Claremont Reading Conference Fifty-Fifth Yearbook*, ed. Philip Dreyer. Claremont, CA: Center for Developmental Studies. (A-R/P)

Kierstead, J. (1987). "Is This Just Another Swing of the Pendulum? That Depends....," *Claremont Reading Conference Fifty-First Yearbook*, ed. Malcolm Douglass. Claremont, CA: Center for Developmental Studies, 1987. (A-R/P)

Kierstead, J. (1984). "Outstanding Effective Classrooms," *Claremont Reading Conference Forty-Eighth Yearbook*, ed. Malcolm Douglass. Claremont, CA: Center for Developmental Studies. (A-R/P)

Pearson, D. P. (December 1995). *Reclaiming the Center*, paper presented at the Michigan State University Winter Reading Symposium and reprinted in *Early Reading: A Powerful Tool for Learning*, California School Leadership Academy, California Dept. of Education. (A-R/P)

Stanovich, K. E. (1991). "Changing Models of Reading and Reading Acquisition," *Learning to Read: Basic Research and Its Implication*, ed. Riegen and Perfetti. Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc, pp. 19-31. (T)

Veatch, J., et. al. (1973). *Key Words to Reading*. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co. (A-R/P)