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## Constructivist Approaches, Phonics, and the Literacy Learning of Students of Diverse Backgrounds\*

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Once again we find ourselves faced with a push “back to basics.” I am deeply concerned about this push because of the significant strides we have made as a field toward understanding constructivist approaches to literacy instruction and their benefits, especially to the literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds. In this paper I want to look at the intersection of three topics that figure prominently in the current debate: constructivist approaches to literacy instruction, phonics, and the literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds.

My perspective on these topics has been shaped by the 24 years I spent working at the Kamehameha Elementary Education Program (KEEP) in Hawaii. The purpose of KEEP was to improve the literacy achievement of students of Hawaiian ancestry enrolled in public schools. These students typically come from low-income families, grow up speaking Hawaii Creole English (a nonmainstream variety of English) and, as a group, score in the lowest quartile on standardized tests of reading achievement. As a beginning teacher, I quickly learned that students could attend school yet still be outsiders to the processes of schooling. In September 1972, we enrolled the first class of kindergarten students at KEEP. I clearly remember the first time I read a story to the class. I called the children to sit in front of me, on the carpet. One of the boys, whom I will call Keoki, eagerly joined the group but sat with his back to me. I began to read, expecting him to turn around, but he did not. Instead, he sat quietly, studying the expressions on the faces of the other children. Keoki’s behavior surprised me, but I realized that he was not being disobedient. Evidently, he had not previously participated in this kind of reading event, and his classmates were of more interest to him than the story. This incident involving Keoki is symbolic of many I have witnessed as a teacher and researcher, incidents in which Hawaiian children literally and figuratively turned their backs on literacy in the classroom.

I do not support the narrow focus of “back to basics” instruction because my research with Hawaiian students, and my experience as a classroom teacher, have shown me that phonics is just one part of children’s literacy learning during the

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first years of elementary school. It is an essential part but, as I will explain, neither the starting point nor the most important element. In this paper, I draw upon three sources of information. The first is our research at KEEP on a constructivist literacy curriculum, centered on writers' and readers' workshops. The second source of information is the larger body of research conducted by others, and the third is the experience of the teachers with whom I have worked.

Let me proceed by outlining some key terms I use in this paper. By *constructivist approaches to literacy instruction* I refer to approaches based on the idea that students create their own understandings of literacy in the context of the various aspects of their lives. A constructivist orientation may be contrasted with a behaviorist orientation, which emphasizes the transmission of knowledge from teacher to students, rather than students' construction of their own understandings (Au & Carroll, 1996). In constructivist approaches, the teacher initiates instruction by getting students interested and involved in the full processes of reading and writing, and skills are taught as part of students' engagement with meaningful literacy activities. Constructivist approaches to literacy instruction include the process approach to writing (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983, 1994), literature-based instruction (Raphael & Au, 1998; Roser & Martinez, 1995), whole language (Goodman, 1986; Weaver, 1990), and balanced literacy instruction (Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 1997; Strickland, 1994–95). These approaches and philosophies are consistent with a constructivist or interpretivist paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Spivey, 1997) and the sociocultural or sociohistorical perspective, as exemplified in the work of Vygotsky (1987) and extended to literacy research and education by scholars such as Moll (1990).

I understand *phonics* to be the teaching of letter-sound correspondences. The term phonics is commonly used to refer to the letter-sound correspondences themselves, as in the phrase "phonics instruction" or in the statement, "Children need to know phonics." Certainly, knowledge of letter-sound correspondences is the basis for decoding words. However, phonics is not the only type of word-identification instruction that students need. Students also must learn to recognize nondecodable words (a category that includes many of the most frequently occurring words), to analyze multisyllabic words, and to make use of base words and affixes.

I use the term *students of diverse backgrounds*, within the United States, to refer to students who are African American, Asian American, Latino, or Native American in ethnicity; who speak a first language other than standard American English; and who come from low-income families. (Although I will be making some generalizations about students of diverse backgrounds as a group, I want to begin by recognizing the immense variability in their cultural and linguistic circumstances, as well as important differences among individuals.) I will argue that constructivist approaches to literacy instruction can be highly beneficial for these students. This conclusion is supported not only by our research at KEEP but by studies by Dahl and Freppon (1995), Morrow and her colleagues (Morrow, 1992; Morrow, Pressley, Smith, & Smith, 1997), and others.

As events have transpired, phonics and skills have become the key issues

that must be addressed, if constructivist approaches to literacy instruction are to win wider acceptance in schools. These issues must be addressed for both instructional and political reasons. First, as literacy researchers and teacher educators, we do need to have a clear understanding of the role of phonics and skill instruction within constructivist approaches, especially for students of diverse backgrounds. Second, we must be able to communicate clearly with policy makers, parents, and the general public. Many NRC members have already been involved in the acrimonious debates centering on issues of phonics and skill instruction—debates with significant implications in the larger political context (Pearson, 1997). If we fail to establish our standing and credibility in these debates, we will increasingly see literacy instruction in classrooms being determined by legislative mandate rather than by sound professional judgment built on knowledge of research, theory, and practice.

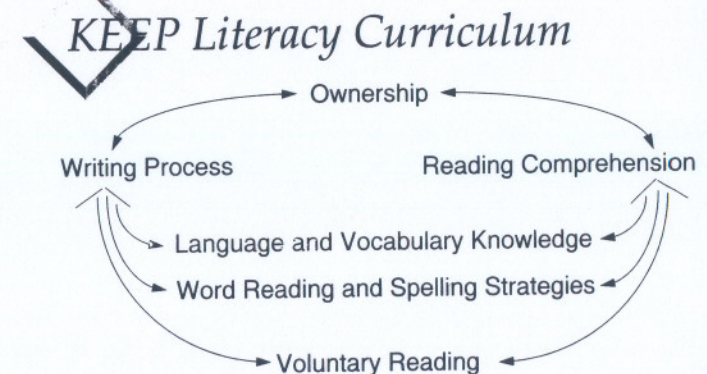
I have written recently about my reasons for recommending a constructivist, process approach to writing, in the form of the writers' workshop, as the starting point for literacy instruction in classrooms with students of diverse backgrounds (Au, 1997a). In this paper, I focus primarily on a constructivist approach to the teaching of reading and literature-based instruction because at present the major debates in our field and in the political arena revolve around these topics. I turn now to six understandings I have gained, from my own research and the research of others, about the teaching of reading within a constructivist framework.

### Understandings from Research

#### 1. Ownership is the Overarching Goal Within a Broad View of the Curriculum.

My first understanding has to do with the breadth of the elementary language arts curriculum and the shift from reading, narrowly defined, to literacy, broadly defined. In research at KEEP, we worked with a curriculum with six aspects of literacy, as shown in Figure 1. The aspects of literacy were ownership, the

Figure 1





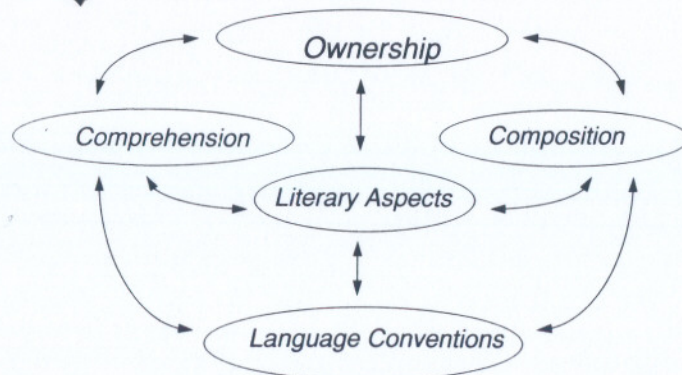
writing process, reading comprehension, vocabulary development, word reading and spelling strategies, and voluntary reading (Au, Scheu, Kawakami, & Herman, 1990). This curriculum recognized the connections between reading and writing and the importance of affective dimensions of literacy, as well as cognitive ones.

Perhaps our most important discovery was that ownership of literacy needed to be the overarching goal of the curriculum. Ownership may be defined as students' valuing of literacy (Au, 1997b). Ownership is seen when students not only have positive attitudes about literacy but make it a part of their everyday lives, at home as well as in school. Students demonstrate ownership by reading books of their own choosing, keeping journals, and sharing books with one another, even when these activities are not assigned by the teacher. The importance of ownership is supported in recent research on the engagement perspective by Guthrie, Alvermann, and their colleagues at the National Reading Research Center (Guthrie & Alvermann, in press). The engagement perspective looks beyond the question of *how* people read to the question of *why* someone would want to read in the first place.

The view of the literacy curriculum reflected in the six aspects of literacy is largely process oriented, which I believe is typical of constructivist language arts curricula developed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Views of the literacy curriculum have now shifted somewhat, as shown in Figure 2, which comes from a recent chapter that Raphael and I wrote (Au & Raphael, 1998).

There are two differences between these curricula that I want to explore. First, the heading *literary aspects* represents a recognition that the literacy curriculum must address content and not just process. Literary aspects include the themes developed through literature, or the ideas that hold the story together and that will be remembered long after details of the plot and setting have faded from memory (Lukens, 1990). Literary elements also include point of view, plot, and

Figure 2  
Current Literacy Curriculum



characters. Of course, the purpose of addressing literary aspects is to enhance the reader's response to the literature, whether that response is personal, creative, or critical.

Second, the heading *language conventions* reflects the idea that literacy is a social process requiring interactional skills and not just text-based skills and strategies. This element encompasses the aspects of literacy represented in the KEEP framework by the headings *language and vocabulary knowledge* and *word reading and spelling strategies*. Besides addressing the traditional skill areas of vocabulary, word identification, grammar, punctuation, and other mechanics, this area deals with the conventions of interaction students must know to participate appropriately in literacy events. Many of these language conventions may be more familiar to mainstream students than to students of diverse backgrounds.

In short, current research shows the breadth of the literacy curriculum. Many studies document the importance of all of these curriculum elements in students' development as readers and writers (Guthrie & Alvermann, in press; Raphael & Au, 1998).

What about the place of phonics in this picture? Phonics is part of one of the five elements in the contemporary literacy curriculum. Phonics cannot be neglected, but there is wide consensus in the literacy research community that it should not be seen as the whole of reading, even at the kindergarten and first-grade levels. As I will explain, research conducted at KEEP indicates that students of diverse backgrounds, who originally turned their backs on literacy in the classroom, may develop greater proficiency in word identification when instruction begins by promoting ownership and not just skills (Au, 1994).

## 2. Constructivist Approaches Improve Both Word Identification and Higher Level Thinking About Text.

My second understanding concerns the importance of providing students at all grades with instruction in comprehension and composition, complex literacy processes requiring higher level thinking. Teaching all students to think with text must be our highest priority.

In our initial work with a constructivist curriculum at KEEP, we made an interesting discovery. The results shown in Figure 3 illustrate the pattern we observed for 2 consecutive years with nearly 2,000 students in six schools in Grades 1 through 3, as measured by a portfolio assessment system anchored in grade-level benchmarks (Au, 1994). We saw better achievement results in some aspects of literacy than in others. The results for these aspects of literacy are shown above the heavy line in the figure, and they are ownership of literacy, voluntary reading, and word reading strategies. What happened, I believe, was that KEEP teachers focused on promoting students' ownership of literacy, and they encouraged students to read books, at home as well as at school. They set aside time daily for sustained silent reading, and the vast majority of students developed the habit of daily reading. Because of this increase in independent reading, students' fluency and accuracy in word identification improved, as indi-



cated in individually administered running records (Clay, 1985). We were particularly surprised to find 39% of the second graders performing above grade level, which in this case meant that they could accurately decode texts at the 3.2 level. Achievement lagged in the other three aspects of literacy: the writing process, reading comprehension, and language and vocabulary knowledge.

These initial results show that gains in word identification were somewhat easier to obtain with constructivist curricula than gains in the more complex literacy processes—composition, comprehension, and the learning of concepts and vocabulary. With the KEEP students, and very likely with other students of diverse backgrounds, word identification was neither as difficult for teachers to teach, nor for students to learn, as these more complex processes. In other words, our findings at KEEP contradict the impression that constructivist approaches are somehow detrimental to students' development of word-identification ability.

In our last 2 years of work with the constructivist curriculum at KEEP, we focused on improving students' higher level thinking about text, particularly in the writing process. We found that a constructivist curriculum was effective in improving students' achievement in these areas, but that teachers needed to implement this curriculum fully (Au & Carroll, 1997). Unlike constructivist approaches, basic skill approaches, such as commercial programs that emphasize phonics drills, ignore the more complex literacy processes and cannot lead to improvement in these processes. There is a mistaken tendency to believe that basic skills approaches are particularly beneficial for students of diverse backgrounds, who may appear from a mainstream perspective to be lacking in certain ways of thinking. This unfortunate tendency may prevent these students from receiving instruction that will be the most valuable to them in the long run, and that is instruction in higher level thinking about text.

Our findings at KEEP do not fit with the views of those who put phonics first and foremost, but they will come as no surprise to those familiar with the extensive

Figure 3  
*Initial Results: Grade 2*

Aspect of Literacy	& Above	% At	% Below	Missing Data
Ownership	30	19	46	5
Voluntary Reading	71	24	5	0
Word Reading Strategies	39	20	38	2
Writing Process	0	33	55	11
Reading Comprehension	5	31	59	5
Language & Vocabulary	3	37	54	6

research base on comprehension instruction developed during the 1980s. We learned early on, most notably from a study by Anderson, Mason, and Shirey (1984), that comprehension does not result naturally as a consequence of students being able to decode every word in a text. Researchers demonstrated that strategy instruction could improve students' comprehension, in terms of their ability to make inferences (Hansen & Pearson, 1983), identify the main idea (Baumann, 1984), summarize a text (Taylor, 1982), and monitor their own understanding (Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Recent work by Beck and McKeown (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy, 1996), in which students are taught to "question the author," builds on this foundation and points to the centrality of active engagement with text, including literature.

Concepts of comprehension have been enriched with the growing interest in literature-based instruction, which has its theoretical basis in reader response theory. Rosenblatt's (1978) work established the distinction between the aesthetic and efferent stances and argued persuasively for the predominance of the aesthetic stance in the reading of literature. Our views of what it means to comprehend have been broadened to encompass personal response, which includes the emotions called forth by the literature and the ability to see connections between literature and one's own life.

### 3. Phonics Instruction Should Be Properly Timed.

In terms of the third understanding, it is clear to me that phonics cannot be the first or only focus for beginning readers, particularly for young children such as Keoki, who are likely to turn their backs on literacy learning in the classroom. The timing of phonics instruction for these children is critical. In fact, in kindergarten and first grade, an overemphasis on phonics instruction, to the exclusion of other literacy activities, may prevent these children from developing the concepts and background necessary for the later development of word-identification ability. Let me explain this point by referring to a discussion in a recent chapter by Stahl (1997). Citing common findings in the work of a number of researchers (Biemiller, 1970; Chall, 1983; Frith, 1985; Lomax & McGee, 1987; McCormick & Mason, 1986), Stahl notes that children go through three broad stages in learning to identify words: awareness, accuracy, and automaticity.

In the first stage, *awareness*, children are developing a conceptual understanding of the nature of written language and its relationship to spoken language. This understanding covers four areas. The first, functions of print, involves understanding, for example, that print can be used to tell stories. The second, conventions of print, includes knowing that one reads from left to right and from the top of the page to the bottom. The third, forms of print, encompasses the letters of the alphabet. The fourth, awareness of phonemes, entails the notion that spoken words can be broken into separate sounds or phonemes, an understanding central to the later learning of letter-sound correspondences. Stahl asserts that these four aspects of the relationship between written and spoken language serve as the foundation for children's later development as readers, and that



children will experience difficulty in learning to read if they lack any of these aspects.

To complete the picture: in the second stage, *accuracy*, children learn to decode words accurately. They focus on print and work to identify words correctly. Children read text aloud in a laborious, choppy, word-by-word fashion, a phenomenon usually termed "word calling." Stahl notes that this stage is generally short lived, leading quickly into the third stage, *automaticity*, when children come to recognize words automatically. The transition from accuracy to automaticity usually occupies the time from the end of first grade to the end of third grade, although it may be prolonged for struggling readers. The rapid, automatic recognition of words is, of course, necessary to free up information processing capacity for comprehension of the text.

This overview of the development of word-identification ability suggests to me that phonics instruction should be emphasized when children are in the accuracy stage, not when they are in the awareness stage, or when they are in the automaticity stage. Phonics plays a crucial but temporary role, and phonics instruction must be properly timed to achieve its optimal effect. Literacy researchers agree that phonics cannot be seen as a blanket approach to beginning reading instruction because knowledge of letter-sound correspondences is not the first, or the only thing, that children need to learn as they develop the ability to identify words.

In a conversation about research on emergent literacy in *Reading Research Quarterly*, McGee and Purcell-Gates (1997) draw a conclusion that is not new but is often forgotten in current debates: "Children learn to read and write successfully if their teachers accommodate their instruction to the children, and they struggle if they do not" (p. 312). This statement certainly applies to young Hawaiian children, who are in the awareness stage when they first arrive in kindergarten. At KEEP we administered emergent literacy tasks (based on the work of Mason & Stewart, 1989) to children entering kindergarten. The typical child could name perhaps one to three letters of the alphabet, often letters that appeared in his or her name, but could not use magnetic letters to represent the first or last sounds of any words. When shown the page of a simple book and asked where there was something to read, the typical child pointed to the illustration, not to the print. Clearly, the typical child was not yet attending to print. Many KEEP kindergarteners, like Keoki, had little or no experience with family storybook reading, and most had not attended preschool.

Unless there is good evidence that kindergarten children are already in or near the accuracy stage, it appears harmful to their overall literacy development to begin with an emphasis on the teaching of phonics in isolation. Note that I am not opposed to an early introduction to phonics, but to the teaching of phonics for its own sake, apart from literacy activities that children will find meaningful. Some kindergarten teachers emphasize drill on letter names and sounds in isolation, a form of teaching that is too abstract for many children. In my observations in classrooms with Hawaiian children, I have seen repeatedly that most fail to benefit at all from these isolated activities. Some children are completely mystified, whereas

others gain the impression that reading is nothing more than a process of rote learning and sounding out. Neither of these outcomes is desirable.

This type of teaching cannot replace instructional activities, such as shared reading or the writing of their own stories, that provide children with meaningful contexts for the learning of letter-sound correspondences. These activities allow children to develop understandings of the four aspects of written-spoken language relationships that form the foundation for later acquisition of letter-sound correspondences. Phonics instruction can certainly be introduced as part of shared reading and children's writing of their own stories, as I will describe next, but phonics should not be taught apart from these meaningful literacy activities.

#### 4. Writing Makes a Significant Contribution to Children's Learning of Phonics.

My fourth understanding concerns the contributions of writing, specifically invented spelling, to children's learning of phonics. In KEEP primary-grade classrooms, teachers conducted a writers' workshop four or five times a week. For kindergarten teachers, introducing the writers' workshop took courage. In September, most kindergarten students are drawing, and just a few are scribbling or using letter-like forms. In classrooms in rural schools, there is often a child who has not had the experience of holding a pencil or crayon and drawing with it.

During the writers' workshop, kindergarten teachers promoted children's understandings of print in many ways. They modeled writing during the morning message and had children make observations about the print in the message (Crowell, Kawakami, & Wong, 1986). They introduced sounds and letters through lessons in which children associated letters with the names of their classmates or familiar objects. They created word walls and posted charts to which the children could refer, including lists of people (*mommy, brother, cousin*) and actions (*planting, surfing, roller blading*). Gradually, teachers identified children who could use invented spelling to label objects in their drawings. During individual or small-group writing conferences, they assisted these children with labeling and then taught them how to use initial consonants to draft short sentences.

In my experience, the writers' workshop provides the best context in which to teach children letter-sound correspondences—phonics—in a manner that makes that knowledge useful and ensures its application. The following summary of my observations in a kindergarten classroom provides a sense of how phonics fits within the larger context of meaningful literate activity in the writers' workshop. In this classroom the teacher had the children keep four questions in mind when they wrote their stories: Who is in my story? What is happening in my story? Where is my story taking place? What else happened? She did not use the terms "characters," "events," and "setting," but the children clearly understood these concepts. I observed a girl drafting the sentence, "I am popping firecrackers with my friends at home." The teacher had taught the children to isolate the first sound in the word and write that letter. Then they were to say the word slowly, listen for other sounds, and add those letters. The girl who wanted to write *firecrackers*



isolated the initial *f* sound, said, “f-f-f,” and wrote the letter *f*. As this example shows, children in primary classrooms with writers’ workshops create their own phonics exercises because of the stories they want to write. The teacher in this classroom, as well as many others, have told me words to this effect: “I have taught letter sounds in isolation, and this way, through invented spelling, is much faster and more effective.”

My observations in classrooms with Hawaiian children are consistent with a growing body of studies pointing to the benefits of invented spelling in children’s long-term development as readers and writers (Ehri, 1987; Wilde, 1989). These studies suggest that children who have the opportunity to use invented spelling eventually become better spellers than children who are taught spelling by rote memorization and never have the opportunity to infer for themselves how the English spelling system works. In the case of both spelling and phonics, it is not just a matter of learning skills but of applying these skills in the context of real reading and writing. Teachers commonly observe that students misspell words they wrote correctly on recent spelling tests. Similarly, studies suggest that many children who learn phonics in isolation do not use these skills when they read (Shannon, 1989), and that by fourth grade, students’ reading problems are related to a lack of automaticity rather than to the absence of basic reading skills (Campbell & Ashworth, 1995).

##### 5. Phonics Should Be Embedded in Meaningful Contexts.

As far as the fifth understanding, I have become convinced that there is not one best way to teach phonics and that students of diverse backgrounds benefit from a multipronged approach that shows them the usefulness of letter-sound correspondences during both reading and writing. Our research at KEEP supports this contention. Decoding by analogy is an approach to word identification, demonstrated to be effective, that has undergone continual refinement, as shown in the work of Gaskins and her colleagues (Gaskins, Ehri, Cress, O’Hara, & Donnelly, 1996–97; Gaskins, Gaskins, & Gaskins, 1991). At KEEP we asked Cunningham (1991) to provide workshops to our teachers on decoding by analogy, and KEEP teachers taught lessons incorporating word walls. The relative importance of onset-rime segmentation and phonemic segmentation in children’s development of word reading and spelling ability continues to be explored in the experimental literature (Nation & Hulme, 1997). However, the KEEP students seemed to benefit both from learning decoding by analogy, which requires onset-rime segmentation, and from learning invented spelling, which led them to employ phonemic segmentation.

Although I know of no research to suggest that there is a single best way to teach phonics (Allington, 1997), I find that there are two principles that underlie effective phonics instruction for Hawaiian students and others of diverse backgrounds. The first principle is that phonics instruction should be explicit. In two controversial and widely cited articles in the *Harvard Educational Review*, Delpit (1986, 1988) presents a convincing case for the explicit instruction of skills within

constructivist approaches, for students of diverse backgrounds. Delpit states that, unlike their mainstream, middle-class peers, students of diverse backgrounds generally do not have the opportunity outside of the classroom to acquire the codes of the culture of power. These codes include such skills as phonics and standard English grammar. According to Delpit, teachers handicap students of diverse backgrounds when they fail to provide explicit instruction in these skills. As indicated earlier, teachers in KEEP classrooms provided students with explicit instruction in phonics through a wide variety of activities. Delpit (1988) adds this caveat, with which I agree:

I am not an advocate of a simplistic “basic skills” approach for children outside the culture of power. It would be (and has been) tragic to operate as if these children were incapable of critical and higher-order thinking and reasoning. (p. 286)

I hesitate to use the word *systematic* along with *explicit* because of the many misunderstandings of what *systematic* might mean when it comes to phonics instruction. There is no evidence for the effectiveness of phonics that is thought to be systematic because the teacher follows a set sequence of skill lessons. As Allington (1997) puts it, “there simply is no ‘scientifically’ validated sequence of phonics instruction” (p. 15). This rigid concept should be replaced by one in which phonics is understood to be systematic because the teacher provides instruction based on ongoing assessment of the children’s needs as readers and writers. Phonics should also be systematic in the sense that teachers devote considerable time and attention to it on a daily basis, when ongoing assessment indicates that such instruction will be beneficial.

The second principle is that this explicit phonics instruction should take place in meaningful contexts in which the reasons for learning letter-sound correspondences can readily be understood by children. In the writers’ workshop, described earlier, children understand that they need knowledge of letter-sound correspondences to put their stories down on paper for communication to others. In shared reading and guided reading, children understand that knowledge of letter-sound correspondences enables them to read the words in books for themselves. Children are pursuing certain purposes through literacy and can see the value of knowledge of letter-sound correspondences in achieving these purposes.

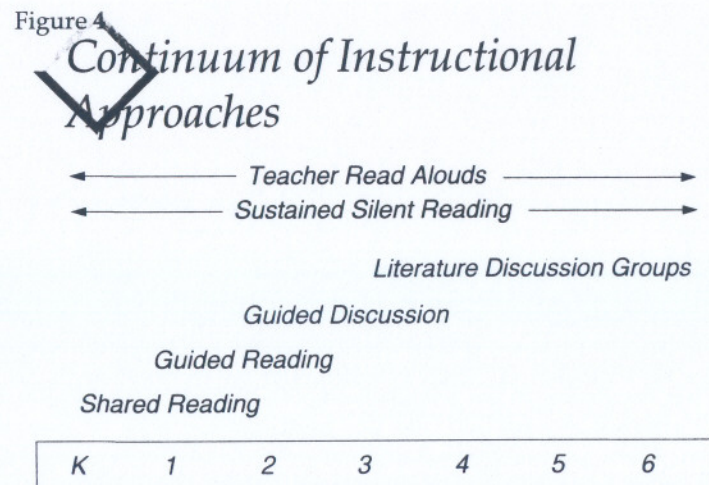
McGee (McGee & Purcell-Gate, 1997) presents a thoughtful discussion of these issues in the conversation with Purcell-Gates cited earlier. She notes that “any understandings constructed about phonemic awareness, or any other of the processes and understandings associated with reading and writing, are always embedded with and connected with all the other processes operating in concert” (pp. 313–314). She emphasizes that it is the richness of these embedded and interconnected understandings that supports children’s literacy learning. Children who have had many opportunities to learn about reading and writing through interactions in a variety of literacy events develop a deeper and qualitatively different kind of understanding from children whose understandings have developed largely through training—especially if that training has focused on the



teaching of letter-sound correspondences or other skills in the absence of a purpose drawn from a larger, meaningful activity. McGee does not object to the game-like activities in these training programs because children on their own do play with language. (And, as described earlier, children create "phonics exercises" for themselves when engaged in invented spelling.) What is at issue is the connections made for children between these activities and their purposeful engagement in the full processes of reading and writing.

#### 6. Literacy Learning is Supported by a Continuum of Instructional Approaches.

My sixth understanding centers on a continuum of instructional approaches, consistent with a constructivist framework, for promoting students' learning to read during the elementary school grades. These instructional approaches are shown in Figure 4. I have observed the use of these approaches in the classrooms of teachers whose success in promoting the literacy of Hawaiian students has been well documented (Au & Carroll, 1997). Two instructional approaches are shown to be useful at all grades: teacher read alouds and sustained silent reading. The other four instructional approaches are arranged in the order in which they would often occur, given students' progress in learning to read. They are shared reading, guided reading, guided discussion, and literature discussion groups. These approaches are often associated with certain grade levels. For example, shared reading is commonly used in kindergarten and first grade, whereas literature discussion groups generally occur after first grade. However, the use of these approaches is not linear. Teachers may use some combination of these approaches with a particular group of students, for example, adding opportunities for extended discussion to shared reading and guided reading. The nature of the text



may also influence the teacher's choice of approach. For example, if a novel proves particularly challenging for students, the teacher may decide to use guided discussion in order to provide greater scaffolding, rather than using literature discussion groups.

*Literature discussion groups.* I want first to say a few words about literature discussion groups because this is the newest instructional approach in my repertoire as a teacher educator, and the one that caused me seriously to rethink my views of reading instruction. Literature discussion groups may also be called Book Clubs (Raphael & McMahon, 1994) or literature circles (Short & Pierce, 1990). Literature discussion groups promote students' ownership of literacy by giving them the opportunity to shape their own conversations about literature. Talk does not follow the typical pattern of classroom recitation driven by the teacher's quizzing. Rather, as Atwell (1987) puts it, these are conversations around the dining room table, the kinds of conversations that adults might have in the real world when discussing books with family, friends, and colleagues.

In workshops on literature-based instruction, I try to give teachers the opportunity to engage in such conversations. I begin these workshops by having teachers read and write in response to a poem, then share their responses in a literature discussion group. I always choose a poem that appears to offer room for a number of different yet plausible interpretations. O'Hehir's (1988) "Riding the San Francisco Train" is a good example of such a poem. Readers usually agree that it conveys feelings of guilt, but they differ widely in their views of the probable source of the guilt. Participants think that the individual is gay, has just been released from prison, or has left an abusive relationship, and they are always able to support their views by referring to particular lines in the poem. Most teachers are surprised by the extent to which literature discussion groups capture their interest and attention, and they contrast this experience with that of typical school discussions of literature, in which the student's goal is to arrive at the canonical interpretation or that favored by the teacher. This brief experience with literature discussion groups often helps teachers gain insights about the differences between literature-based instruction, rooted in reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1991), and other ways of teaching reading.

Many teachers are quick to see the value of having their students participate in literature discussion groups. For teachers in the primary grades, the question arises: If students are to gain the background needed for them to participate in and benefit from literature discussion groups, how do we prepare them for this experience? To address this question, I will briefly discuss my views of the other instructional approaches in the continuum, beginning with shared reading.

*Shared reading.* As mentioned earlier, many Hawaiian children in low-income communities enter kindergarten without having participated in family storybook reading. Shared reading, in conjunction with the reading aloud of picture storybooks, provides the teacher with a prime opportunity to introduce these children to the joys of reading and of books. When they enter kindergarten, many young Hawaiian children are in the awareness stage in their development of word-



identification ability. Shared reading is beneficial because it provides teachers with opportunities to promote all four of the understandings about the relationships between spoken and written language that develop during this stage. Teachers can help children gain knowledge of an important *function of print*, that print can be used to communicate stories. Teachers can model how readers observe *conventions of print*, such as directionality. Teachers can call children's attention to the *forms of print*, including letters of the alphabet and punctuation. Teachers can develop children's *phonemic awareness*, by pointing out or having children identify words that rhyme, or words that begin or end with the same sounds.

In terms of the development of word-identification ability, shared reading serves the crucial function of moving children from paying attention only to pictures to paying attention to print. As Sulzby's (1985) work on young children's storybook reading demonstrates, this shift is a major landmark in literacy development. Teachers worry that children memorize the texts of big books, and they question whether children are actually referring to print. In my observations of young Hawaiian children, I have seen that memorization of the text plays an important role in their development as readers. The ability to associate certain exact words with each page signals their understanding that text is stable and unchanging. This understanding leads to another, that the memorized words they recite can be matched with the print on the page. Teachers can guide children to slow down their recitation of the text and to point to each word as they say it. In this way, memorization of the big book text contributes to development of the children's ability to track print.

Holdaway (1979) notes that, even during the introductory stage with a big book, teachers should "induce sound strategies of word solving by encouraging and discussing suggestions, at an appropriate skill level and without unduly interrupting the story" (p. 72). In one activity, the teacher copies the text of the big book on an overhead transparency. The words are covered with strips of paper and progressively unmasked, letter by letter. When teachers unmask words, they model for children how good readers look at each letter of a word in order, moving from left to right. A critical feature of this and related activities is the requirement that children attend closely to print and break away from a reliance on pictures. Shared reading lays the foundation for independence in word identification encouraged through guided reading.

*Guided reading.* A major focus of guided reading is to teach children to use reading strategies—particularly strategies of word identification—independently. A comprehensive treatment of guided reading, based on Clay's (1991) research, is provided in a recent book by Fountas and Pinnell (1996). Guided reading may be introduced when children are moving from the awareness stage to the accuracy stage. Whereas shared reading is usually conducted with the whole class, guided reading takes place with a small group of children whose reading processes are at a similar level. The teacher introduces a previously unseen little book to this small group, and the children read the book on their own, with a minimum of help from the adult. For many Hawaiian children, the move from shared reading to guided

reading is quite a leap. For one thing, they must track the print on their own, as they are now looking at their individual copies of the book, not at a big book in which the teacher is tracking the print for them. Also, they are expected to read through a text that has not previously been read aloud to them. I see teachers providing scaffolding as children make the transition from shared reading to guided reading. For example, the teacher may have the children look at her copy of the book. She remains silent but tracks the print as the children read along for a page or two. Then she has the children continue independently in their own books.

During guided reading, the central activity is the children's own independent reading of the text. As the children read the text on their own, the teacher monitors their performance. Fountas and Pinnell use the phrase "small detours" to describe the problem-solving assistance given by the teacher when children need help. They caution teachers to be very quick about individual interventions, so that children can immediately return to their efforts at meaning construction. This view echoes Holdaway's concern that the teacher not "unduly interrupt" the flow of the story during shared reading. By conducting a mini-lesson after the children have finished reading, the teacher can address the points of difficulty identified earlier.

*Guided discussion.* As children gain proficiency in word identification, they are able to read more complex texts. These texts include picture storybooks, such as Choi's (1993) *Halmoni and the Picnic*, that contain such elements as a theme, memorable characters, and a plot with a problem and solution. These books offer the possibility for in-depth, guided discussion. In guided discussion, the teacher uses questioning to sharpen students' understanding of the theme and other story elements and to help them make personal connections to the text (Au, 1992).

Teachers at KEEP used the form of guided discussion known as the experience-text-relationship or ETR approach (Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 1997). Lessons of about 20 minutes are taught to small groups of children, and the lessons on a particular story usually take from 3 to 5 days. As in guided reading, these are children whose reading processes are at a similar level. The teacher selects a text the students will be able to read largely on their own, on a topic likely to be of interest, and she identifies a possible theme for the text. In the experience or E phase, the teacher introduces the story and has the students discuss experiences they have had, which relate to the possible theme. As the lesson enters the text or T phase, the teacher has the students read the first segment of the story silently. As in guided reading, she assists students who encounter a problem while reading. After reading, the students discuss this part of the text, with the teacher guiding discussion to focus on key points, such as the characters and events, as well as the emerging theme. The lesson alternates between silent reading and discussion, until students have finished reading the text. In the relationship or R phase, the teacher helps the students to draw relationships between their own experiences and the ideas in the story. It is not uncommon for students to construct their own theme for the story, rather than assenting to the theme planned by the teacher (Au, 1992).



The teacher may focus on one or two teaching points near the end of the 20-minute lesson. As in shared and guided reading, the idea is that skill instruction should intrude as little as possible upon students' ongoing efforts at constructing meaning from text. The teacher has the students return to the text and reread the passage containing the target word, and she and the students discuss how the word might be identified and what it might mean. Often, especially as students reach the third grade, they are beginning to encounter multisyllabic words, such as *ricochet* or *coincidence*, that may not be part of their speaking vocabularies. The need at this point is not usually for phonics but for other strategies useful in identifying and deriving the meaning of unfamiliar words. One of these strategies is "look in, look around," which involves looking in the word to find a base word and affixes, and around the passage to gain a sense of what the word might mean (Herman & Weaver, 1988).

For many Hawaiian students, guided discussion provides the background necessary for their later participation in literature discussion groups. Teachers encourage students to read carefully and thoughtfully, in preparation for sharing their ideas with others. In the process, teachers familiarize students with traditional comprehension skills such as identifying the sequence of events and with literary elements such as character development, flashbacks, point of view, and theme. Students engage in in-depth discussions of literature, under the teacher's guidance, and present justifications for their interpretations. Perhaps most importantly, guided discussion can contribute to students' ownership of literacy, as they learn to make personal connections to books and to see that books can have themes of relevance to their lives.

*Read alouds and sustained silent reading.* In classrooms with Hawaiian students from low-income communities, read alouds serve the important function of allowing teachers to act as literate role models and to convey their own love of books and reading. This function is particularly important in these classrooms, because few such role models may be available to students.

The reading aloud of picture storybooks in kindergarten and first grade, when shared reading and guided reading are the principal instructional approaches, appears to play a critical role in the literacy development of Hawaiian children. The reason is that the majority of texts children can read on their own in these grades are not likely to be high quality works of children's literature or to have many ideas worth discussing at length. Children delight in books with simple but clever texts, such as *Mrs. Wishy-washy* (Cowley, 1990), and these texts help them to acquire a sense of what it is like to be a reader, to develop strategies for identifying words, and to gain confidence. At the same time, the children's development as readers is greatly enhanced if the teacher reads aloud picture storybooks, such as *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters* (Steptoe, 1987), which are too difficult for the children to read on their own. Many Hawaiian children will not be able to read such meaty texts independently until they are in the second or third grades. Picture storybooks give the teacher the opportunity to engage children in thought-

ful discussions of literature. As I have argued, attention to comprehension and other complex literacy processes is required even at the earliest grades.

Teachers effective in teaching reading to young Hawaiian children often put limits on the books that children may read during the time set aside for sustained silent reading (which in kindergarten and first grade is usually not particularly sustained or silent). One first-grade teacher marks books according to difficulty, giving each book a blue, yellow, or red dot, and the children in her class know which books they should be reading. The teacher justified her system to me in these words: "The reason I do that is because I don't want them to start working with books and just read the pictures. I know they can read the pictures already." She wanted to be sure her students were focused on print. If the children were interested in books they could not yet read on their own, they could take these books home and have their parents read them aloud. A similar insistence on students' independent reading of books at an appropriate level of difficulty is observed at Benchmark School, which has a record of success in assisting struggling readers (Center for the Study of Reading, 1991). In both cases, students have a choice of numerous books, but these books must be those that they can read on their own, so that independent reading contributes to students' application of effective reading strategies.

The general point I wish to make about the continuum of six instructional approaches, consistent with a constructivist framework, is that Hawaiian students and others of diverse backgrounds are not expected to develop reading ability through some magical process. Instead, teachers foster reading development through the systematic application of specific instructional approaches. These approaches enable students to understand the functions of literacy, to identify words and to read them in a fluent and accurate manner, to comprehend text (nonfiction as well as fiction), to construct themes, and to develop personal responses to literature.

### Closing Thoughts

Proficiency is an essential goal for the literacy achievement of students of diverse backgrounds, and knowledge of letter-sound correspondences or phonics is, of course, necessary for proficiency in reading. However, the teaching of phonics is not the first task a teacher faces with students such as Keoki. The first task is to make sure that students do not turn their backs on literacy but come to realize that literacy can be meaningful to their lives.

Because of my interest in the literacy learning of Hawaiian students and others of diverse backgrounds, I have had to consider the question of how to motivate students to become excellent readers and writers. The answer, I believe, lies in developing students' understandings of the reasons why people read and write in real life. One of the most compelling reasons is the joy of reading and becoming "lost in a book." Another is the understanding of one's own life that



can grow from writing personal narratives. Both these reasons are readily grasped by students of diverse backgrounds when they experience literature-based instruction and the readers' workshop, and the process approach to writing and the writers' workshop.

Swings of the pendulum "back to basics" take place periodically, and other presidents of the National Reading Conference, beginning with Jim Hoffman, have issued calls to action. However, I judge the present situation to be different from those we have seen before, in terms of the power of the political forces at work, and the magnitude of the consequences for students and teachers and for our profession. The choices are clear.<sup>1</sup> Our first choice is that we can actively resist the proposed legislative mandates for a narrowly defined return to basic skill instruction. Our second choice is that we can comply with these mandates and simply do what the new laws require. Our third choice is that we can appear to agree with the new initiatives, but continue to go about our work in the way that we see fit. Our fourth choice is that we can create and champion policy alternatives consistent with constructivist approaches.

My decision is to make this fourth choice. My greatest fear in the move "back to basics" is for the future of Hawaiian students and others of diverse backgrounds. On one hand, studies demonstrate that these students are the most vulnerable to the negative effects of a narrowing of the curriculum (Allington, 1991). On the other hand, a growing body of research shows that these students can and do benefit from constructivist approaches to literacy instruction (Au & Carroll, 1997; Dahl & Freppon, 1995; Morrow, 1992; Morrow, Pressley, Smith, & Smith, 1997). We have an obligation to educate policy-makers and the general public about this research and a constructivist vision of the teaching of reading and writing. I have indicated that the present situation is different because of the strength of the political forces at play, but it is also different in terms of our knowledge as researchers. We have come too far as a field in our understanding of literacy learning, constructivist approaches, and their benefits to students, to remain silent or to be silenced. If we are ever to make our voices heard, now is the time.

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