

POINTS OF VIEW

Balanced approach needed in teacher plans

QUESTION: As an elementary teacher, I sometimes feel like a pingpong ball. After 26 years in the business, I've been through more educational movements and theories than I can remember. Now we are into the Whole Language Approach. Can you forewarn us of any new theories coming down the line so we can be ready?

ANSWER: Certainly. Be ready for the Artificial Intelligence movement, a theory that says if a child knows X about something, we know he/she must know Y. Therefore, save time and skip teaching Y. This is a concept any competent teacher has known for ages.

And yes, some freelancing entrepreneur will pump out an Artificial Language and the Teacher novel, hit the educational circuit, make a fortune and then move on to something else. The Whole Language Approach, a supposedly new concept, is in vogue now. It's a concept, along with the developmental theory, that I have received more voice mail calls on than any other topics this year.

The Whole Language theory combines reading, writing, spelling and language arts into a singular all-em-

compassing process of learning. The belief here is that children will learn better through a "whole" approach rather than through the teaching of isolated skills. Phonics and other basic skills are to be introduced when appropriate.

Carried to the extreme, a few Whole Language advocates frown on ever using a textbook (called basal readers, which major textbook companies have spent millions developing, using the most competent teachers they could find in the country). These advocates also frown on the use of worksheets. (And, oh, I almost said the evil word "Ditto.")

The opposite extreme occurs when Ditto Danny and Ditto Darlene flip dittos on kids' desks every day and sit at their desks waiting for lunch. A balance is needed!

This is where the problem lies. Education goes from one movement to another, sometimes from one extreme position to another, and the teacher is caught in the middle. If I wanted to take a shot at the Whole Language Approach, which I support as one of many learning models, I could use an analogy of the football coach, the band director or the high school play director.



Doc Doyle

Let's use an extremist "whole" approach for football practice. The coach scrimmages every day. No drill and practice until the coach finds out the needs of each player.

I've got news for you. Competent coaches, as with teachers, know what the needs are, and the successful ones do a sufficient amount of drill and practice to ensure that the players have mastered the basic skills necessary for success.

Championship high school bands and successful school play directors spend hours on details that could be conceived as basic skills prior to opening the curtain for the first act or entering a state band competition.

So I am leery of these supposedly

new "only way to go" movements. But I am far more against a constant drill and practice atmosphere which develops non-thinking robotic children dancing to the tune of those in control over them.

The present polarization that is developing among teachers is literally killing the Whole Language concept, which is a wonderful process in helping children to comprehend, be better problem solvers while increasing their higher level thinking skills.

The "whole" method of instruction is really not new. John Dewey one of education's greatest philosophers, introduced that approach in the late '30s and '40s. He believed children working on a high-interest topic, approaching a topic in totality, was the way to develop self-sufficient thinking students. His system became labeled, progressive education, and the public — then the newspapers literally destroyed him and his concept. They believed kids were not getting their basic skills but just having fun. Leo Tolstoy, one of our greatest writers and thinkers, held the same beliefs as Dewey and greatly influenced Dewey's thinking.

But watch what happens in education! A philosopher, after Tolstoy, named Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (in

the late 1700s) believed in reducing topics to their basic elements and building from that foundation, as in a basic skills approach.

And sure enough, after Dewey came an educational philosopher named Jean Piaget who believed in starting from the basics, from the concrete skills to more abstract reasoning skills.

So here we have the greatest educational philosophers of all time bouncing back and forth from a basic skills mindset to a whole, experiential mindset for children's learning. And you, the teacher, are indeed the pingpong ball being bounced back and forth.

Why in God's world can't we take the best of both worlds, the Whole Language Model for developing thinking skills with the use of some adaptive supplementary workbook materials to ensure basic skills are mastered and quit confusing citizens and frustrating teachers?

Is it that difficult to figure out? James "Doc" Doyle, a former teacher/school administrator/university instructor, is president of Doyle and Associates, an educational consulting firm. To leave a message for Doyle from a touchtone phone, dial 9532047 mailbox 1856.

ACLU stands for religious liberty for all sides

This is in response to "Leftists participate in politically correct bigotry," in the Observer & Eccentric, Monday, June 7, by Regina Saler.

The American Civil Liberties Union attempts to preserve and enhance individual liberties, including religious liberty, as guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. As a public education organization, it is apolitical and nonpartisan with strict prohibitions against endorsing or aiding candidates for elective or appointed office. As a public interest law firm, it represents clients whose civil rights have been violated, without regard to their "left" or "right" or "conservative" or "liberal" beliefs.

The ACLU advocates the separation of church and state. It does so not because it dislikes or disapproves with religion or any particular religious doctrine or practice. Indeed, it believes that religious freedom is one of America's most important traditions and consti-

tutional rights. But separating religion from government is absolutely essential to preserving religious freedom. This is because government would undermine religious freedom by telling us whether to believe, what to believe, and when, where and how to worship.

The ACLU's advocacy of the separation of church and state often results in charges that it is hostile to religion. However, in several Michigan cases, the ACLU has represented religious groups and individuals in their attempts to worship and carry out their mission.

For example, a bishop of the Church of God Pentecostal Church in Kalamazoo was recently cited for violating a noise ordinance because of his parishioners' "joyful noise." The bishop is being defended by a volunteer ACLU attorney. And the ACLU successfully defended an Episcopal church where neighbors objected to the church's providing meeting space for Alcoholics

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Anonymous and sheltering the homeless; won a Michigan Supreme Court case for the right of a Warren woman to host worship services in her home where the city had claimed that her home was not a church and not in an area zone for churches.

Other successes included parishioners of a local church who wanted to display religious messages on signs in their front yards; convincing the Newaygo City Council to redraft its sign ordinance to permit those signs; and applaud a recent Michigan Supreme Court decision that requires the state to reasonably accommodate parents who home-school their children according to their religious beliefs.

To my knowledge, the ACLU did not host a meeting outlining the dangers of right-wing activists." Perhaps Ms. Saler is referring to a panel discussion held at Congregation Adat Shalom, Farmington Hills, May 11. The panelists represented a variety of organizations and ACLU of Michigan's executive director, Howard Simon, participated. The event was hosted by the Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit and the National Council of Jewish Women, Greater Detroit Section.

The discussion was open to the public and well attended (I was there). Its tone was hardly anti-religious; indeed, the setting was a beautiful house of worship! The topic was "stealth candidates" — that is candidates who quietly file for local offices, then shun publicity and decline to campaign or discuss their agendas. The message of the May 11 event was that voters have a right to know what candidates stand for and should exercise that right.

Finally, I stress that I would unhesitatingly defend Ms. Saler's First Amendment right to freely exercise her religion. I invite her to call upon the American Civil Liberties Union if she ever feels that that right is violated.

Elsa M. Shartsis is chair of the Oakland County branch of the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan. She is a Birmingham attorney.

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