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Top-notch reporting, by journalists who get into classrooms and know what to look for, can blunt rather than fuel the vehemence of these controversies.

### *The READING Wars: phonics vs. whole language*

Some of us are old enough to remember “Dick and Jane,” mainstay of the “look-say” method of teaching reading. In 1955, Rudolf Flesch wrote “Why Johnny Can’t Read,” a hugely influential book that denounced this method and advocated the systematic teaching of the sounds associated with letters, known as phonics. By the 1990s, “whole language,” whose proponents believed that children needed to know only small amounts of phonics as they concentrated on absorbing the meaning of the passages, became popular.

These days the term “whole language” is no longer in vogue, driven out by attacks on its effectiveness starting in the 1990s. Instead, you’ll hear the term “balanced literacy.” This approach is a bit more structured but still pays less explicit attention to letters and their sounds than many would like. Those who think phonics are overemphasized use the epithet “drill and kill” to signal their opposition to lessons they say destroy creativity and imagination. But keep in mind that phonics is not a teaching method – it’s one of the elements good readers must master.

Despite those debates, researchers agree that students need to know phonics, be aware that words can be broken into sounds, have a good working vocabulary and be able to read fluently and comprehend meaning. Catherine B. Snow, a prominent researcher at Harvard University, says comprehension is a major issue and the source of the huge gaps in reading scores that open up after the fourth grade along socioeconomic lines.

#### **What you’ll see in good classrooms:**

In good primary grade classrooms, where reading is taught most explicitly, you’ll see a variety of techniques and activities: teacher-led reading, individual reading, discussions of the sounds of letters, practice with the sounds of letters, many opportunities to write, children talking about authors, and so on. You should be able to see such variety in the classrooms of teachers who rely on direct instruction as well as those whose lessons resemble literacy workshops.

### *The MATH Wars: reform math vs. traditional math*

Like the reading wars, math wars have a long history. But the terms “reform” and traditional math have

been in use for only about the past 20 years, since the 1989 publication of a set of standards by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics that tried to nudge teachers away from concentrating solely on accurate calculation. Experts such as Deborah Loewenberg Ball of the University of Michigan urge reporters to eschew both terms, saying they mean little.

Some of the controversies here involve the proper use of calculators, the use of objects called “manipulatives” to illustrate math concepts, the proper role of memorization, and the need to learn and practice standard “algorithms” or mathematical processes. Controversies tend to erupt over commercial curricula such as TERC or “Everyday Math” or “Connected Math,” all of which were created based on the 1989 standards. They spark controversy because critics say they underemphasize the need to learn to do rapid calculations. Despite those worries, surveys of classrooms have found that most of the time devoted to math in the United States is spent learning to calculate.

Regardless of the program or philosophy, students need to:

- Understand mathematical concepts and operations, such as addition and subtraction, and solving algebraic equations.
- Perform these procedures fluently and accurately.
- Be able to represent a situation mathematically. (If Johnny has 15 candies and four friends he wants to share with, how many candies does each get ...)
- Be able to talk about the math, explaining one’s reasoning.
- Be inclined to think that math is sensible and worth working to learn.

#### **What you will see in good classrooms:**

Many different representations of math and math problems, regular math lessons (some observational studies have found that math can get short shrift), kids talking about math and explaining their work, evidence that students know math facts and procedures.

### *The HISTORY Wars*

This is one battle that seems to have been put to rest with the advent of state academic standards laying out what students need to learn. Controversies in the past involved whether history should be taught from a multicultural perspective – to recognize the contributions of minority groups – or as a way of uniting society through a common history. But conflict still can break

out, especially when periodic assessments show that American students still don't know much about history or when textbooks incorporate recent events, such as the 9/11 attacks. The proper balance between learning facts—such as the dates and causes of the U.S. Civil War – and being able to conduct research, use original documents, and make inferences will always be a part of education debates. But clearly both are necessary and the issue again comes down to the skills of the teacher and whether schools are providing appropriate curricular materials and modes of instruction.

**What you'll see in good classrooms:**

In middle and secondary school classrooms, students should be expected to do research and write about their findings. They should engage in discussions, based on their research and not just opinions, and should have opportunities to work with original documents, contemporaneous letters, and data.

*The SCIENCE Wars*

As with history, educators don't always agree on the proper balance between knowing facts and being able to

apply them. There is little disagreement, however, that it's essential that students learn the fundamentals of the scientific method. In fact, the National Science Teachers Association recommends that 80 percent of class time be spent on experiments and hands-on activities. Beyond that, reporters should have a sense of what's in the state standards regarding science.

To learn science well, students need to be taught by well-trained teachers who know their subject well. And they need to be able to conduct experiments in well-equipped laboratories. Many states are increasing graduation requirements for science but have no plans for making sure teachers are well-prepared or classrooms are well-equipped.

*Summing up*

Regardless of the subject matter, education writers must get beyond “the wars” and the political conflict that accompanies them. They need to get out into schools and classrooms and learn about the real issues – knowledge and preparation of teachers, class size, equipment, and materials – that prevent American children from learning as well as they should. ■

## Tools for Reporting on Teaching: What to Look for in Classrooms


a new web site  
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It's often hard to get out of the newsroom and into classrooms, with all the pressure to crank out stories... When journalists do venture out, they should bring with them a working knowledge of the elements of great teaching to know what to look for.

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