

In conversation with Maryanne Wolf

Bulletin editor **Wendy Moore** spoke to Professor **Maryanne Wolf** at the conclusion of her recent Australian tour.

Wendy: *We have been so lucky to have you visit us in Australia, and I really enjoyed the talk you gave us today at the Collingwood Town Hall. You said that you were keen to get your message out to those who couldn't make it to your sessions, so thank you for sharing your thoughts with me today. I'd like to ask you about advocacy first. There is a palpable sense of both potential and frustration for groups working to change the way our institutions support students with a whole range of learning difficulties including dyslexia. What would be your message to these groups, and to the policy makers that they work hard to influence?*

Maryanne: Even though I have only been here two weeks, I have been bombarded by the frustrations of parents, teachers, principals and even policy makers about the gap between what we know in research and what is being done for children in Australia. If I could wave a magic wand, I would create a national campaign in which all of the groups do several events as soon as possible, and have simultaneous, public relations efforts in newspaper outlets, in blogs, in conferences – especially conferences – involving principals and policy makers. Change has to involve both the ground level with parents and teachers, but also the levels of administration and policy change.

A major issue is how to reach those who are in leadership roles. When I was in Sydney, there was something called the Leadership Development Day. They had

me come in to talk to principals, especially young aspiring principals. I thought that this was a really wise kind of intervention. It would be wonderful to do that in every state so that the young principals get more and better information. The problems that I see are as much about ignorance about what works, as about adherence to the binary ways of the past. Both of these problems, however, have to be addressed. To combat the ignorance, a campaign for children with learning challenges in Australia would stress the knowledge base we already possess in the US, and that is used in some parts of Australia, thanks to LDA. Various people, from parents, teachers to political leaders and media, would be involved, and paediatricians as well.

But when it comes to the breaking down of previous binary ways of thinking and teaching, this to me is the largest and most difficult problem, because it is has been entrenched for almost half a century. The history of the debate over reading methods is an interesting one; one of my teachers at the Harvard Reading Lab, Jeanne Chall, wrote the book *The Great Debate*. She once told me that she had amassed all the data available in the world at that time on the subject and that it was totally clear that explicit instruction in decoding principles was overwhelmingly better for most children. Nevertheless, she went on to say, within five years the pendulum will swing back to whole language for two reasons: first, because it has become something of a religion to people instructed in it; and second, because there is always a regression to the comfortable mean. The regression to the mean (i.e., how teachers were first taught) is a particularly insidious and difficult problem, because so often wonderfully well intentioned idealistic young teachers were taught by their teachers in Schools of Education that to allow the child to be creative and to love reading means that their task is to immerse the child in the beauties of literature, rather than helping them learn how to read so that they can become immersed. The result is that you have this very odd, even politically weighted, axis: people have been taught



that to adopt whole language methods is to be imaginative, creative, and politically progressive; and that phonics methods (using explicit instruction) are destructive to creativity and politically reactionary. Indeed many whole language instructors assume that phonics is synonymous with kill and drill and worksheets. The tragic result of this unnatural dichotomy is that many young idealist teachers are in complete ignorance about what explicit instruction really involves, which from my standpoint is the teaching of the first parts of the reading brain circuit.

To this very moment, in many parts of Australia creativity is associated with whole language, rather than the more complex reality: that creativity is part of a whole circuit of processes, each of which children have to learn if they are to climb up those early rungs of reading. Strategically, it was politically brilliant for the founders of whole language methods to associate left, progressive, imaginative thinking with their methods; while right-wing, kill and drill methods were associated by them with explicit instruction. But from the standpoint of research and many children's future potential, it couldn't have been a more egregious error. From my perspective as a reading brain researcher, this false dichotomy was the most destructive error in twentieth century education.

Wendy: *We are often reminded of the crucial place of play in a child's development, and warned about the dangers of a 'push-down' curriculum that focuses on academic skills such as reading too early. What are your thoughts on this issue?*

Maryanne: There should be no binary conceptualization of play and learning; in fact, the opposite. Learning should be playful. It should be full of excitement! I often use the term courtship of language to describe a great deal of what we do as teachers of reading. Whether we call it child's play or word play, all of this is learning the most important precursors to reading, but it's whimsical learning, it's playful learning, it's engaging learning. The idea that learning has to be this almost catatonic ingraining of knowledge instead of working with the child's imagination to make play and learning come together, that's another piece of this horrible bifurcation between learning and joy or between implicit and explicit methods. Learning to decode is not kill and drill, because learning to read is joy. The idea that learning something difficult like the letter-sound correspondence rules is not joy, or is not playful, is a piece of the ill-conceptualisation of what reading acquisition should be.

I need to say a few more things about play and early reading. First, and perhaps surprisingly, I worry that there can actually be too much emphasis on reading in terms of the curriculum in Kindergarten. In the States I have seen that too often on the backs of Kindergarten children are placed the aspirations of principals for good test results in the third grade. There are some children, especially boys, who are developing more slowly. The idea that they should be pushed to decode as soon as possible can actually cause reading problems that would not have emerged if given more time. So we've got several possible things going on that are converging into a perfect storm in which things can go wrong for two very different reasons.

There should always be a very careful look at how much time should be given to certain children, particularly young boys. Towards that end, teachers need to be familiar with the tools of early diagnosis and how to apply that knowledge to an understanding of what different children need. Early prediction batteries are tremendously important, because there is no 'one-size-fits-all' for any child. Our most recent work on prediction shows that in Kindergarten we can predict six different subtypes of future readers. Of these, there are at least three types of readers with differing dyslexia profiles, and they will need different emphases over time. This is fantastic information that will then help us target specific forms of instruction and intervention. Teachers need a toolbox of knowledge about what kinds of instruction are best for which children.

Wendy: *Are there students for whom functional literacy really is too*

demanding a goal? Is there a point at which these students spend so much of their time and energy learning to read and spell that no time is left for the things they really care about, are good at, or love to do?

Maryanne: No! I think functional literacy is a right for every human who has the intellectual ability to do so. Literacy should be the most basic goal for the entire world. Both the UN and Pope Francis view literacy as a civic right. That doesn't mean that there aren't some children with certain intellectual challenges who can't learn to read. But there are children who - against all predictions - do learn to read. Once again, we must know our children, and we must view literacy as a basic human right.

Wendy: *Working with adolescents, and attempting to foster an appreciation of literature, can be a challenging task. 'Why', they often ask, 'can't we just save time and watch the movie?' Will literature - by which I mean specifically novels, poetry and essays - become a dwindling and specialist interest?*

Maryanne: The demise of the book has been heralded for the last two centuries. And it still exists, just as radio still exists, despite being assigned to the garbage heap by many over many years. Expert reading requires some of our most sophisticated thought processes, some of which are shared with the visual medium in film, but some of which are unique to both. But what is different about reading is that it allows a very beautiful pause, and the ability to go back, the recursive dimension that film does not possess in the same way. Within this pause the reader is invited to think at levels of depth and meaning and richness that a film often isn't able to provide. But film provides something else. It would be a paler world without the visual imagery that good film gives us. But it would be a less deep thinking world if the opportunity for true reflection and novel thought that is the gift of deep reading would diminish or atrophy.

Novelists are particularly worried about this possibility. Some of my friends are novelists: Gish Jen, Chinese American novelist; Allegra Goodman, another wonderful novelist; Jayne Smiley, another. In their perspective, it's not so much that the novel will die, but rather that it could be sidelined, as it is given less precedence. And with that will be a far greater, more insidious and invisible demise, which is the ability to be transported, to pass over from ourselves to others. There's an identification process that happens with time - over time - inside a novel. That instantaneous

identification in film can give us a sense of it, but never for as long as we receive in a novel. I actually hate the very thought that we would ever replace one with the other. They both enrich us daily!

But I want to return to what Jane Smiley meant about the sidelining of the novel, and why such a scenario would be so dangerous. She felt that people would begin to lose the understanding of 'other'. This is no ordinary loss. In this loss we would be governed by people who never truly understood what it means to be another person: in their shoes, in their poverty, in their despair, in their disappointment. If the novel had not entered their souls, if you will, or given them this ever-deeper understanding of who other people are, Smiley believed that we could someday be governed by people who really don't know others, only themselves. I do not want to comment on the political implications of this thought in the climate of the current American election.

Part of this concern is related to the fact that the digital culture encourages such vast amounts of information that people default to ever narrowed sources of information that confirms what they think. In other words, with such a glut of information and communication available, you end up only reading and doing blogs and communications with those who think just like you. The paradox here is too much information can mean too little knowledge and critical analytical thought by us.

Wendy: *You are fascinated by the potential of technology to change the brain in new and perhaps yet unknown ways. So should we be putting laptops into primary school classrooms?*

Maryanne: It's a complicated and very difficult question. I've worked on that in the book *Tales of Literacy for the 21st Century*, but I'm also working at it even more systematically in the next book, *Letters to a Good Reader*. With that book I am attempting to provide a proposal for the ideal young reader from zero to ten years in a digital culture. My hope within that trajectory is to depict a childhood in which the child will have very little technology before two years old; gradual introduction of technology from two to five years; coding and programming beginning at five and six years old; and reading being introduced through print from the start. Through a gradual transition, the child would receive explicit instruction not only in reading print in physical form, but also in how to read on a screen. By ten, I hope a beautiful, flexible, informed bi-literate brain will emerge for the children of Australia and around the world.