

Foreword

The International Development in Europe Committee (IDEC) of the International Reading Association (IRA) has been in existence for over 20 years. IDEC meets twice a year to plan activities and pursue professional interests and contacts. We hold the meetings in varying regions in order to encourage professional development and international knowledge. Professional content is assured by holding a **European Seminar on Reading** in association with every meeting, except those attached to conferences. These seminars have been going on since at least 1980, and the most recent took place in Huy, Belgium, January 2003.

Traditionally, the hosting Association selects the seminar topics. Under the general theme "Current Challenges in Literacy", the Belgian Francophone Reading Association proposed three issues currently in debate and submitted to the participants the following framing questions:

4. **Balanced approaches in early literacy: integration of methods, individualisation of learning**

The question of the "best method" for teaching reading ran through the whole of the last century. The debates have come and gone and come again, always "phonics" versus "something" - and this time "whole language". However, in about the last 10 years, things have been changing, more and more researchers and teachers would like to go beyond the "method issue". They denounce the "flawed search for a perfect method" (Duffy & Hoffman, *RT*, 53,1, 1999), arguing that the answer is not in the method but in the teacher, and others (Dahl & Scharer, *RT*, 53, 7, 2000) manage to show that whole language and phonics are not necessarily "opposite sides of a curricular coin".

Of course, those findings don't solve the problem. They don't mean for instance that any mixture of methods will work. In fact, it opens a new, and maybe more difficult question: how to help a struggling reader by choosing the method that will work for him, particularly?

5. PISA and after?

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), led in 2000 by the OECD and aimed at assessing reading literacy among 15-year-olds in 32 countries, has had a strong impact in the public arena (through broadcast media and the press), at least in the French-speaking part of Belgium. Usually, the discussions have been focused on the relative ranking of the countries.

But, beyond the rank order, what can specifically be learned from PISA for the development of literacy among teenagers and for reading instruction in general? Do some countries seem to provide a more fruitful context for the growth of literacy? Do the PISA results provide new research evidence regarding reading instruction? How were the PISA results interpreted and used in the various countries? Did they give rise to reforms or revisions of the reading curriculum?

6. The use of children's literature in classrooms

Many teachers are moving towards greater use of children's literature (vs. textbooks) in their classrooms, and curriculum developers are putting together programmes based around literature. This move to literature-based reading instruction reflects a change in our beliefs and practices about curriculum materials. But what exactly are those beliefs and those practices? What are the present trends and issues concerning the use of children's literature in classrooms across the curriculum?

We warmly thank each one who submitted papers and hope that those proceedings will give readers as much food for thought as the Huy Seminar gave the participants.

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