Marshall Memo 997

A Weekly Round-up of Important Ideas and Research in K-12 Education
July 31, 2023

A Special Issue on the Early-Literacy Debate

The Long-Running "Reading Wars"

1. Four waves of debate on phonics
2. Phonics first?
3. Concerns about "three-cueing"
4. Can't we all just get along?

Research on Early Reading

5. Ten keys to effective primary-grade teaching
6. It's not either/or, it's both/and
7. The link between content knowledge and reading
8. Scarborough's rope

Phonics Nuts and Bolts

9. Principles for teaching phonics
10. Why phonics is more challenging in English than Italian
11. Effective early literacy instruction for African-American students

Pulling the Strands Together

12. The reading brain
13. Differentiating through four stages of students' reading development
14. Toward an integrated approach
15. Finding common ground

Quotes on Early Literacy

"The goal of reading is to derive meaning from text. Children who learn to effectively 'crack the code' (i.e., decode words) have achieved a necessary, foundational, early reading skill… Mastering decoding processes allows readers to shift their time and attention away from the need to laboriously decode individual words and phrases toward processing the ideas and gaining meaning from the stories that they read."

Julie Washington, Ryan Lee-James, and Carla Burrell Stanford (see item #11)

"Unlike in most regular alphabetic languages, contending with phonics in English is not a smooth freeway that moves nonreading children to independent reading. Instead, it is more like a complex maze of country back roads that must be navigated thoughtfully based on a number of contingencies. Teachers and other adults need to play the role of an intelligent, adaptable GPS."

David Reinking and Sharon Reinking (see item #10)

"Given the complexities of learning to read, it is essential to consider how reading develops broadly, the role of each component of reading throughout a reader's development, and the reality that not all readers develop in every area at the same rate."
Melanie Kuhn and Katherine Dougherty Stahl (see item #13)

"Nothing in reading acquisition is more important than beginning systematic, targeted intervention as early as possible."
Maryanne Wolf (see item #12)

"Knowledge begets reading, which begets knowledge."
KyeJin Hwang, Kristen McMaster, and Panayiota Kendeou (see item #7)

"The lifeblood of a literacy program is real language as experienced in read-alouds, children's literature, opportunities to speak, listen, and write. Children also need to see teachers and parents take joy in literacy."
Daniel Willingham (see item #4)

"Teaching students to recognize words without also teaching them to integrate, interpret, apply, judge, critique, and construct arguments about or with them is an example of systematic oppression. If literacy is to liberate, its components must fully integrate."
Rachael Gabriel (see item #14)

THE LONG-RUNNING "READING WARS"

1. Four Waves of Debate on Phonics

In this *Phi Delta Kappan* article Leah Durán (University of Arizona/Tucson) and Michiko Hikida (Ohio State University) put the current advocacy for increased emphasis on phonics and other aspects of early literacy instruction in historical perspective:

- In the 1950s, Rudolf Flesch's bestselling *Why Johnny Can't Read* said the lack of phonics in public schools had created a national security crisis.
- In the 1960s, Jeanne Chall led a "great debate" between code- and meaning-focused instruction.
- In the late 1980s and 90s, the argument resumed, with phonics warring with whole language; the 1983 *A Nation At Risk* report claimed that a decline in phonics instruction had produced a dramatic drop in SAT scores.
- In recent years, the debate has flared up again, this time with "science of reading" vying with "balanced reading instruction." Many states and the District of Columbia have passed early literacy laws requiring a greater emphasis on phonics.

The common factor in all four eras has been the contention that elementary schools need to get back to basics, embrace rigorous, code-based teaching, and reject "unscientific" approaches.

Durán and Hikida believe there isn't now, nor has there been historically, "a pedagogical crisis *specific to literacy*. Rather, what we see is an ongoing crisis of *equity* that cuts across all domains of children's opportunities to learn." They cite evidence that back-to-basics, letter-sound correspondence reading instruction has been more common in under-resourced schools serving children who have been labeled "poor readers," and those students have been less likely to have balanced literacy instruction and engage with complex ideas.

"Making Sense of Reading's Forever Wars" by Leah Durán and Michiko Hikida in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2022 (Vol. 103, #8, pp. 14-19); the authors are at leahgduran@arizona.edu and hikida.3@osu.edu; summarized in Marshall Memo 935

Back to page one

2. Phonics First?

"There is widespread agreement that teaching phonics is an important component of early reading instruction," say David Reinking (Clemson University), George Hruby (University of Kentucky), and Victoria Risko (Vanderbilt University) in this article in *Teachers College Record*. But phonics instruction has become highly politicized and ideological in recent years. Today's advocates of prioritizing phonics have the following core beliefs:

- There is a crisis in reading achievement in the U.S., and it is explained by a failure of mainstream educators to fully invest in the primacy of phonics.
- Phonics is not just *an* essential component of learning to read; it is *the* essential component.
- Therefore, phonics should dominate early reading instruction, with vocabulary development, comprehension, fluency, and motivation addressed afterward.
- Virtually all difficulties in learning to read are attributed to and remedied by phonics.
- Once children master phonics, almost all of them will become successful readers.
- A synthetic approach – teaching letters and their sounds and blending them to pronounce words – is preferred and emphasized.
- All children should move together through a well-defined sequence of phonics skills.
- Phonics instruction should continue through the primary grades and, if necessary, beyond.
- A settled science unassailably supports these beliefs, assertions, and assumptions.

These precepts have energized and directed the efforts of a diverse coalition: frustrated parents demanding straightforward answers to their children's reading difficulties; professional organizations created to promote phonics first; commercial interests selling phonics teaching materials and services; politicians and journalists persuaded by the arguments; and a few outspoken academics who believe phonics is the technical solution to reading problems. This coalition has been very successful in driving the current debate and passing legislation.

But are the beliefs behind the phonics-first movement correct? Reinking, Hruby, and Risko say disagreements about the role of phonics go back to the early 1900s, and flared up in the mid-1950s, when Rudolph Flesch blamed the whole-word approach used by most American schools for disappointing reading achievement. Then in the 1980s and 1990s, *whole*

language emerged as a distinctly different approach, drawing on psycholinguistic theory to promote a more organic way to teach reading, seeing it as a natural outgrowth of oral language. Whole language proponents rejected explicit phonics instruction, instead introducing it at teachable moments as students engaged with meaningful texts.

Phonics advocates vigorously pushed back, and there were more than 100 legislative efforts that successfully countered whole language's influence in schools. By the early 2000s, a *balanced approach* emerged as a middle ground, based on the belief that authentic and meaningful language activity was compatible with systematic phonics. But phonics proponents didn't buy the compromise and criticized balanced literacy as whole language in sheep's clothing. That argument has continued in the current "science of reading" debate.

Reinking, Hruby, and Risko critique four key assertions that underlie the phonics-first movement:

• *Assumption #1: There a reading crisis in the U.S. caused by inadequate phonics instruction*. A troubling 30 percent of students are reading below the basic level, but there has not been a noticeable surge of underachievement that would indicate a crisis; NAEP reading scores have been basically flat since the 1960s. Is the number of students not reading proficiently caused by inadequate phonics instruction? There's no evidence of that, say Reinking, Hruby, and Risko.

What *does* influence students' reading proficiency? "Teachers' experience and dedication, the availability of materials, instructional leadership, context, and a variety of out-of-school factors," say the authors. "Without overwhelming evidence to the contrary, it is unlikely that any single in-school factor, let alone one instructional variable such as phonics, can be so powerful that it is the single cause of virtually all variation in reading achievement."

• *Assumption #2: The 2000 National Reading Panel report supports the current push for phonics*. Today's phonics-first advocates point to the NRP report as evidence for their approach to teaching phonics. But the NRP report, say Reinking, Hruby, and Risko, took a nuanced look at the research on alphabetics and phonics and didn't recommend one teaching approach. In addition, it emphasized the importance of not overdoing phonics, the role of teacher expertise and judgment, and making sure students understand *why* they are learning letters and letter sounds. Subsequent research has fine-tuned the NRP findings on phonics, but there still isn't a definitive template for how decoding should be taught.

• *Assumption #3: A "balanced" approach to early reading is really "whole language."* Definitely not, say Reinking, Hruby, and Risko. Whole language had its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s and declined quickly thereafter, supplanted by a synthesis of approaches that gave plenty of emphasis to phonics – *integrated with* vocabulary development, building background knowledge, writing, comprehension strategies, monitoring, exposing students to meaningful texts, student motivation, and emphasizing teacher judgment and differentiation.

Phonics-first advocates continue to assert that whole language and the balanced approach are one and the same – and that they're ineffective. Mostly incorrect, say Reinking, Hruby, and Risko. Whole language had a very mixed track record and is used in only a small number of

classrooms today, but there is solid evidence that "the most experienced and successful teachers of reading use a balanced approach."

• *Assumption #4: The research debate is over and phonics won*. Not so, say Reinking, Hruby, and Risko; there is no justification for saying "there is a settled science of reading that provides final answers about how reading should be taught to every child, particularly among those who live in poverty and who experience institutional inequities and injustice… There is no one uppercase *Science of Reading*. Instead, there are multiple lowercase *sciences* of reading, each contributing interesting and relevant findings to our understanding. But to suggest that they constitute a settled science of reading is to ignore the history of science, or, for that matter, reading research," which is a constantly evolving field with new insights emerging every year.

"We see physicians," continue the authors, "because we expect them to know the latest science and the evidence about effective practices in general. But we want them to apply professional judgment that includes clinical experience and a deep understanding of our individual case. Anything that might be considered standard practice in general is not necessarily best practice in every particular case." It's the same with reading instruction: there are some solid principles and research findings, but new insights are emerging all the time, and there's an important role for teachers' judgment as they work with each child.

"Ironically," conclude Reinking, Hruby, and Risko, "the promotion of phonics has become more of a movement, much akin to whole language in its heyday. Therefore, it can be accused of the same questionable tactics leveled against its historical adversary. It uses evidence rhetorically, not scientifically, despite its claims. Consequently, its stance is promotional, not neutral… It draws support from anecdotal cases and arguments sometimes dispensed by journalists and media outlets, and it ignores or discounts unfavorable evidence. It engages in polemics for the sake of political lobbying driven by a fervent, and often emotional, commitment to and belief in an unmitigated truth, not a dispassionate consideration of what might effectively serve the needs of those who teach reading and, more important, the students they teach."

"Legislating Phonics: Settled Science or Political Polemics?" by David Reinking, George Hruby, and Victoria Risko in *Teachers College Record*, January 2023 (Vol. 125, #1, pp. 104-131); Reinking can be reached at david.reinking@uga.edu; summarized in Marshall Memo 980

Back to page one

3. Concerns About "Three-Cueing"

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Margaret Goldberg (Right to Read Project) and Claude Goldenberg (Stanford University) say the latest round of the reading wars has many educators groaning. Wasn't the phonics/whole language battle solved 20 years ago with Reading First, finding the "radical middle" with balanced literacy?

It was not. Over the last few years, "science of reading" advocates, catalyzed by journalist Emily Hanford, have contended that balanced literacy retains many of the problematic practices of whole language, especially *three-cueing*. Proposed by Kenneth

Goodman in 1976, the idea of three-cueing is that students should use three sources of information to recognize individual words: meaning, structure, and visual (pictures, context, etc.). Hanford contends three-cueing is ineffective, providing struggling readers a rocky road to reading proficiency. She bemoans the fact that this debunked practice is widely used in classrooms (*Don't sound it out!*) and taught in teacher preparation programs.

"Because three-cueing was baked into popular curricula and promoted by authors who are beloved by teachers [e.g., Lucy Calkins]," say Goldberg and Goldenberg, there's been a lot of soul-searching and debate. For many teachers, learning that there was a gap between reading research and their classroom practices was upsetting. Being told that their well-intentioned methods were misguided was especially painful when teachers realized that the critique of three-cueing had been circulating for years. "I should have known this!" said one teacher.

"Meaning, syntax, and context," say Goldberg and Goldenberg, "can, and should be used to confirm whether a word has been read correctly. But teaching students to orchestrate 'cues' from meaning and structure rather than to decode words is inefficient and even risky… While the number of teachers who will admit to not knowing the basics of reading research might be shocking to outsiders, the fact that so many teachers have entered the profession unprepared to teach reading is not surprising to anyone who has paid attention to the reading wars over the last half-century. It was only a matter of time before teachers would discover we had been let down by our training and curricula."

The 2001 Reading First initiative was an attempt to bridge the divide between classrooms and research and end the reading wars. Three-cueing should have been buried once and for all, say Goldberg and Goldenberg. But as No Child Left Behind funding ended, schools were free to adopt previous practices and the pendulum swung back. A decade later, 72 percent of schools reported using balanced literacy and 75 percent said they taught three-cueing.

Now the cycle is repeating, with "a flurry of legislation" aiming to re-emphasize phonics and outlaw three-cueing. But as has been true in the past, say Goldberg and Goldenberg, top-down legislation won't work; in the "loosely-coupled" world of K-12 schools many teachers are making decisions based on what they believe is best for their kids.

Nevertheless, the authors are cautiously optimistic that three post-Reading First insights will allow U.S. educators to "break free from the seemingly endless history of reading wars and disappointments":

• First, cracking the alphabetic code is non-negotiable. Beginning and early readers must develop phonological awareness, understand the alphabetic principle, and fluently use phonics and decoding as the primary means of recognizing words. There's a strong consensus on this among literacy researchers, authors, and publishers, and there's movement away from three-cueing.

• Second, developing as a proficient reader requires much more than foundational skills. Recent research has clarified the role of background knowledge, motivation, orthographic mapping, writing, and how children learn.

• Third, there are still gaps in our knowledge about literacy instruction. We know more about the science of reading than about how to teach reading, say Goldberg and Goldenberg.

We need to "embrace a stance of informed humility, bringing teachers, school and district leaders, policymakers, advocates, and researchers together to break down the divide between research and practice so that students will benefit from what researchers and practitioners both can teach us."

"Lessons Learned? Reading Wars, Reading First, and a Way Forward" by Margaret Goldberg and Claude Goldenberg in *The Reading Teacher*, February 2022 (Vol. 75, #3, pp. 621-630); the authors can be reached at marigoldberg.mg@gmail.com and cgoldenberg@stanford.edu; summarized in Marshall Memo 938

Back to page one

4. Can't We All Just Get Along?

In this article on his website, Daniel Willingham (University of Virginia) asks whether we agree or disagree with each of these statements about learning to read:

1) The vast majority of children first learn to read by decoding sounds.
2) A very small percentage of children teach themselves to decode with very minimal input from adults; more children can do so with a little support.
3) The speed with which most children learn to decode will be slower if they receive haphazard instruction in phonics; most need systematic phonics instruction.
4) Phonics instruction is not a literacy program. "The lifeblood of a literacy program is real language," says Willingham, "as experienced in read-alouds, children's literature, opportunities to speak, listen, and write. Children also need to see teachers and parents take joy in literacy."
5) Systematic phonics instruction might seem boring, but studies have shown that it doesn't harm children's motivation to read.
6) That said, phonics instruction can be overdone, and teachers need to make sure to emphasize the real-literature and affective dimensions of literacy.

Phonics proponents embrace 1, 3, and 5; balanced literacy advocates agree with 2, 4, and 6. Actually, says Willingham, all six statements are true. Zealots on both sides of the reading debate "are ignoring abundant research and have above-average capacity to kid themselves." Others agree with all six but want to emphasize the ones they're passionate about.

"The larger point," Willingham says, "is that the conflict is a waste of time and I suspect most people know it. There's plenty of other work to be done."

"Just How Polarized Are We About Reading Instruction?" by Daniel Willingham, October 29, 2018 in *Science and Education*; Willingham can be reached at willingham@virginia.edu; summarized in Marshall Memo 759

Back to page one

5. Ten Keys to Effective Primary-Grade Teaching

In this article in *Reading Universe*, Reid Lyon boils down recent studies from neuroscience, psychology, linguistics, speech pathology, and other fields to these "maxims" about teaching children to read:

• Almost all children learn to speak naturally; reading and writing, on the other hand, must be systematically taught.

• Literacy begins at birth and is rooted in early social interactions and experiences including regular exposure to spoken language and print.

• Decoding, which depends on a child's ability to identify individual speech sounds, is the on-ramp for word recognition. Decoding should be taught until children can accurately and independently read new words.

• Reading fluency both requires and supports comprehension. Fluent readers read with expression, and at an appropriate rate for their age, because they can instantly and accurately recognize most words in a text.

• Comprehension is the goal of reading and draws on multiple skills and strengths, including a solid foundation of vocabulary and background knowledge.

• There isn't a single correct way to teach children to read. Data from each child should be used to differentiate instruction.

• Direct, systematic instruction helps students develop the skills they need to become strong readers. Guessing words is chancy and inefficient.

• English learners often need extra support to bolster their oral language as they learn to read and write in a new language.

• We need to honor home dialects that differ from "standard" English and give those students the support they need to become bidialectical.

• To grow into proficient readers and writers, students need to integrate many different skills over years of literacy experiences inside and outside of school.

"The research behind the maxims," says Lyon, "addresses a wide range of individual differences in reading development, reading difficulties, and reading instruction… The overarching message is that learning to read is a complex process involving multiple abilities, skills, and knowledge. Each is essential but none is sufficient on its own."

"Ten Maxims: What We've Learned So Far About How Children Learn to Read" by Reid Lyon in *Reading Universe*, May 2023; summarized in Marshall Memo 988

Back to page one

6. It's Not Either/Or, It's Both/And

In this *Shanahan on Literacy* article, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/ Chicago) advises a teacher whose district told primary-grade teachers that decoding is the most important thing, sent teachers to LETRS training, and purchased phonics materials that require frequently testing students on "nonsense word frequency."

Shanahan believes that to become readers, young students must learn to decode, and phonics and phonemic awareness are essential to becoming proficient decoders. But he's concerned that this district's leaders, in their "prodigious and well-meaning efforts to ensure that happens," are ignoring decades of literacy research. "They've left the bop out of the bop-sh-bop-sh-bop," says Shanahan. "Or more accurately, they've left the science out of the 'science of reading.'"

Those pushing for more phonics do have a point, he says. Decoding has been under-emphasized in a significant number of classrooms, with students not taught to sound out unfamiliar words. "We certainly have work to do to make sure that phonics is taught," says Shanahan, "that teachers have supportive, high-quality instructional materials aimed at that. Investing in professional development on decoding is wise, too."

"But that's the easy part," he continues. The challenging part, with parents and media advocates clamoring for phonics, is doing those things while not underemphasizing the other elements that are essential to getting students to be proficient, self-sufficient readers. "Ignoring or delaying language comprehension instruction," says Shanahan, "is not the smart way to correct the decoding problem." He cites eight research strands that support systematic early decoding instruction *in conjunction with* other components of effective instruction.

- Jeanne Chall (*Reading: The Great Debate,* 1967, and other studies) was a leading proponent of phonics, but never in a vacuum.
- Marilyn Jager Adams (*Beginning to Read*, 1990) explicitly rejected the idea of either "phonics first" or "meaning first."
- Hollis Scarborough gave word recognition and language comprehension equal weight and stressed a reciprocal relationship between the two, using the metaphor of a rope intertwining the components (see #8 below).
- The National Reading Panel (2000), on which Shanahan served, incorporated its findings on phonics with four other components of effective literacy instruction.
- The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that more than half of students who attained average proficiency in phonics still struggled to read, showing that decoding is necessary but not sufficient.
- In 1998, Reid Lyon, Jack Fletcher, Barbara Foorman, Joe Torgesen, and others endorsed a more-comprehensive approach to meeting children's reading needs, with the different strands pursued simultaneously, not sequentially.
- Sharon Vaughn and Maureen Lovett have focused on children with dyslexia and found that they need more than decoding to be proficient readers.
- Karen Harris and Steve Graham are working on research that emphasizes the need to tackle phonics and language comprehension simultaneously.

"I could go on and on," says Shanahan, "but I think you get the idea. The scientists who know the most about this are big proponents of teaching phonics, but they don't buy into the idea that it's phonics first or phonics only. Those ideas come from folks who are trying to push a pendulum, for a sale, or (perhaps like your district) who want to respond to community pressure without taking the trouble to examine the science of reading."

What should primary-grade teachers be doing to get the best results for all their students? Shanahan sums up the key elements:

- Teach phonics about 30 minutes a day.
- Devote comparable amounts of time to each of the other components of proficient reading, including the ability to read text fluently, comprehension, writing, vocabulary, and background knowledge.

"Doing it that way," he concludes, "kids get what research says is an effective dose of phonics instruction, and they don't miss out on all the other things that they need if they are to become good readers."

"What Do You Think of 'Phonics First' or 'Phonics Only' in the Primary Grades?" by Timothy Shanahan on *Shanahan on Literacy*, September 10, 2022; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu; summarized in Marshall Memo 952

Back to page one

7. The Link Between Content Knowledge and Reading

In this *Reading Research Quarterly* article, KyeJin Hwang, Kristen McMaster, and Panayiota Kendeou (University of Minnesota) report on their study of elementary students' reading and science achievement. They tested the proposition, "Knowledge begets reading, which begets knowledge" – does students' background knowledge make them better readers, and does being a good reader foster the acquisition of more knowledge?

The answer? Yes and yes. The relationship between science knowledge and reading proficiency "is bidirectional and positive throughout the elementary years," say the authors, "providing empirical evidence that domain knowledge and reading may mutually enhance each other… This finding indicates that students need consistent instructional support for developing both domain knowledge and reading from the beginning of schooling." The study also found that this synergistic relationship was true for bilingual as well as monolingual students.

But the reading-content link isn't perfectly symmetrical. Hwang, McMaster, and Kendeou found that increasing science knowledge contributed more to students' reading proficiency than reading instruction contributed to science achievement. That is an argument, they say, for (a) beefing up science instruction (and other content areas) and (b) coordinating and integrating content instruction with reading lessons through vocabulary, books, magazines, hands-on experiments, and more.

"A Longitudinal Investigation of Directional Relations Between Domain Knowledge and Reading in the Elementary Years" by KyeJin Hwang, Kristen McMaster, and Panayiota Kendeou in *Reading Research Quarterly*, January/February/March 2023 (Vol. 58, #1, pp. 59-77); the authors can be reached at hwang305@umn.edu, mcmas004@umn.edu, and kend0040@umn.edu; summarized in Marshall Memo 985

Back to page one

8. Scarborough's Rope

This graphic, created by Hollis Scarborough, shows how two groups of literacy strands weave together, resulting in a single "rope" – a skilled reader who fluently executes and coordinates word recognition and text comprehension:

• Word recognition (increasingly automatic):
  - Phonological awareness
  - Decoding and spelling
  - Sight recognition

• Language comprehension (increasingly strategic):
  - Background knowledge
  - Vocabulary knowledge
  - Language structures
  - Verbal reasoning
  - Literacy knowledge

"Connecting Early Language and Literacy to Later Reading (Dis)Abilities: Evidence, Theory, and Practice," pp. 97-110 in *Handbook of Early Literacy*, S.B. Neuman and D.K. Dickinson (eds.), Guilford Press, 2002)

Back to page one

PHONICS NUTS AND BOLTS

9. Principles for Teaching Phonics in the Primary Grades

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Kevin Flanigan, Katie Solic, and Lisa Gordon (West Chester University) channel the dilemmas faced by a first-grade teacher a few weeks into implementing her district's phonics program:

- Differentiation – Only a third of the class seems to be doing well, with one-third bored (they already know phonics) and one-third frustrated.
- Transfer – While many students are proficient on weekly phonics assessments, they aren't consistently applying those skills to their reading and writing.
- Time – Thirty minutes of phonics every day is taking time from reading connected texts, read-alouds, and writing.
- Modification – May I tweak the program? Blending activities are working for many students, but what about using word sorts and decoding by analogy?
- Decodable texts – The school's program comes with decodable texts to practice just-learned skills. While some sound silly (*The man with the hat sat on a mat*), these texts seem helpful – but should I also use patterned and controlled vocabulary texts?
- Rules – Students can recite *When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking* and others, but aren't applying them. Are these rules useful?

- Sight words – The program has a list of high-frequency "quick words" (*the, of, with*) that students are supposed to read automatically, but several students are struggling to master them. Why are sight words taught apart from phonics lessons?

"These questions highlight the most common, important, and difficult phonics issues our fellow educators wrestle with every day," say Flanigan, Solic, and Gordon. Drawing from a wide range of research and their own experience, they suggest these principles to address primary-grade teachers' concerns.

• *It's about teaching the English spelling system, not just decoding*. The goal for students is not to score at the proficient level on a nonsense-word decoding task. "By teaching phonics," say the authors, "we mean teaching a 'working knowledge' of the spelling system – how to apply an understanding of the systematic relationship between letters and sounds in reading and writing." Students should be able to accurately and efficiently (a) recognize words while reading, (b) produce words while writing, so they can (c) focus their attention on making meaning – the ultimate goal.

• *The English spelling system makes sense once it's understood*. Many of us were taught that spelling in our language is so unpredictable and has so many exceptions that you have to memorize most words. "In fact, quite the opposite is true," say Flanigan, Solic, and Gordon: 84 percent of English words are spelled phonetically – 96 percent if a word's etymology is taken into account. But teachers have to know the phonetic system – for example, the pattern of short and long *A* (and the oddballs like *said, again,* and *they*). Patterns and principles are more valuable than ironclad rules. Once teachers know that phonics works, they can show students that phonics makes sense, can be interesting, and provides the "keys to the kingdom."

• *Our brains are better at recognizing patterns than applying rules*. The well-worn rule about *two vowels go walking* is true only about 45 percent of the time, say the authors. Teaching rules like that and *i before e, except after c* will lead to confusion when students run into the exceptions. Better to use the rules as mnemonic devices to remember phonics generalizations and teach high-frequency spelling patterns that students will encounter in their reading. Students should be able to "walk through" words with reasonable expectations.

• *Explicit and systematic does not mean scripted*. "You can be systematic and explicit without following a script or a lock-step schedule," say the authors. "In fact, we believe a skilled teacher is more effective when they modify an approach and an instructional schedule to fit their students' needs." They suggest these guidelines:

- *Systematic* means teaching a comprehensive scope and sequence of concepts and skills in logical order, from easier to more difficult, striving for student mastery at each step.
- *Explicit* means teachers directly explain each concept in a deliberate, student-friendly, and precise way, drawing on their own expertise – not assuming students will figure things out on their own.

Gradual release of responsibility is a good approach – *I do, we do, you do*, with explicit modeling and the teacher thinking out loud,. The research on decodable texts is mixed, say the

authors; they recommend mixing them with natural language patterned texts and controlled vocabulary texts.

• *Teach for transfer*. Flanigan, Solic, and Gordon use the analogy of sports training: a swimming coach spends 15 minutes explaining a stroke and then athletes devote the remainder of the two hours to practice with feedback. Phonics instruction, say the authors, should be about 20 percent instruction (*I do*), 40 percent targeted practice (*we do*) with lots of teacher coaching, and 40 percent independent reading and writing (*you do*). The ratio might be somewhat different for beginning readers and those having difficulty with word recognition and fluency. "Periodic *cumulative review* of phonics features is also critical in maintaining word knowledge over time," say the authors.

• *Use a multi-faceted approach to develop a phonics toolbox*. It's a misconception that synthetic phonics is the single best research-based approach, say the authors. "In fact, there are multiple approaches to explicit and systematic phonics instruction that yield benefits for many students in word recognition." They propose an approach that mixes synthetic, analogic, and analytic methods, providing "a robust pathway to accurate and efficient decoding."

• *Differentiate instruction by teaching developmentally*. It's important, say Flanigan, Solic, and Gordon, to do an initial screening to identify which students are proficient and which are not, then follow up with diagnostic assessment with struggling students to find out exactly what's holding them back. The diagnostic should include (a) a developmental spelling inventory, (b) a letter-name and sound recognition assessment, and (c) an informal reading inventory and perhaps a writing assessment. With this information, teachers can form 3-4 groups and meet students' needs more effectively. "Differentiating does not mean you never teach whole-class phonics lessons," say the authors. "However, whole-class phonics lessons should be brief (perhaps 10 minutes), leaving you the bulk of instructional time for differentiated small-group word work."

• *Automaticity is the goal: students learn phonics so they don't need to use it*. "For skilled readers," say the authors, "this automatic word recognition should eventually 'run in the background' so cognitive resources are freed up to focus on reading and meaning." This will happen over weeks of instruction as students (a) decode unfamiliar words in their reading, (b) generate possible spellings of words in their writing, and (c) combine these with phonological awareness to orthographically map words, so they make connections between the sounds they hear in words and the letters they see representing those sounds – and the words stick in their long-term memory.

"In the end," conclude the authors, "it's about the teacher, not the program… We've seen phonics lessons taught in the same school, using the same program, by different teachers, with wildly different results. Yes, you need a strong phonics program that includes a systematic sequence of features and skills along with appropriate resources, but as these eight principles illustrate, it's your expertise in the content and pedagogy of phonics and the spelling system that will make the difference." Teachers need to be "thoughtful adapters" who use their expertise in ways that meet the needs of all their students.

"The 'P' Word Revisited: 8 Principles for Tackling Today's Questions and Misconceptions About Phonics Instruction" by Kevin Flanigan, Katie Solic, and Lisa Gordon in *The Reading Teacher*, July/August 2022 (Vol. 76, #1, pp. 73-83); the authors can be reached at kflanigan@wcupa.edu, ksolic@wcupa.edu, and lgordon@wcupa.edu; summarized in Marshall Memo 954.

Back to page one

10. Why Phonics Is More Challenging in English Than Italian

In this *Journal of Reading Recovery* article, David Reinking (Clemson University/ University of Georgia) and Sharon Reinking (a retired teacher with 31 years in the primary grades) say, "Unlike in most regular alphabetic languages [Italian is the most straightforward], contending with phonics in English is not a smooth freeway that moves nonreading children to independent reading. Instead, it is more like a complex maze of country back roads that must be navigated thoughtfully based on a number of contingencies. Teachers and other adults need to play the role of an intelligent, adaptable GPS."

Reinking and Reinking propose foundational principles for teaching, learning, and applying phonics in any alphabetic language:

• *Phonics is necessary but not sufficient for real reading to occur*. "Reading is not pronouncing words," say the authors. "It entails understanding and reflecting on thoughts, ideas, and information communicated through writing. It also includes the unique pleasures of reading, often through genres of creative writing such as poetry and fiction."

• *Alphabetic texts are not just speech written down*. Speaking, especially in person, conveys inflections, cadences, and emotions that written texts try to capture through punctuation, italics, bold-face type, all-caps, and graphics. Speech is a continuous stream of thoughts with brief pauses here and there, while written texts separate groups of letters with white spaces.

• *Certain things must be in place before young children are ready to learn and apply phonics and decode*. Kids must be able to carry on a simple conversation, know the letters and the sounds they make, have phonemic awareness (that a word like *cat* is composed of discrete letters and sounds), and grasp the basic conventions of writing: groups of letters make words and, in English, lines of words are written left to right, top to bottom on a page – and where to start reading a book. If a child hasn't acquired or been taught phonemic awareness, say Reinking and Reinking, "phonics instruction will be meaningless."

Knowing the challenges of learning phonics in English helps overcome the "paradox of expertise" (also known as the "curse of knowledge") – the tendency among literate adults to see phonics as "easy" for children to learn, forgetting the complexities and challenges they mastered long ago. "To teachers, and most adults," say Reinking and Reinking, "reading has become incredibly easy in most situations, almost as natural as breathing, maybe even more so… So, one of the challenges for teachers and other adult readers who want to help children learn phonics is to overcome their own expertise and the illusion that decoding in English is relatively easy."

The "overarching implication" of all this, say Reinking and Reinking, "is that anyone helping children use phonics in English needs to be aware of and appreciate its complexity and difficulty. That means not assuming nor giving children the impression that sounding out words by individual letters or letter combinations is foolproof decoding, nor the essence of reading… For teachers, and for those who directly support their efforts, a deeper and more-nuanced understanding of phonics in English is necessary." The authors suggest some basic principles that any English phonics program should address:

• *Evaluating and prioritizing generalizations and skills* – "Because it is unreasonable to teach every possible phonics generalization," they say, "a logical implication is the need to decide which generalizations merit more attention than others. Which are more or less reliable, have the fewest exceptions, or are easier to explain and apply with fewer technical terms?" There are arcana that may *not* be worth knowing – for example, the small number of words in English where spelling changes the pronunciation of *th*: *bath* and *bathe*, *breath* and *breathe*, *teeth* and *teethe*. "Why make phonics in English any harder than it already is?" quip the authors.

• *Determining when to move away from or cease phonics instruction* – At some point phonics should be phased out, allowing children, supported by their teachers, to sort out other idiosyncrasies of the English language.

• *Supplementing phonics with other approaches and strategies for decoding* – These include teaching a set of high-frequency words by sight and encouraging students to compare and contrast similar spelling patterns and use them to identify new words by analogy.

• *Using professional judgment to accommodate individual differences* – "Much like a good doctor who will vary treatments and dosages for individual patients," say Reinking and Reinking, "teachers need to merge deep knowledge of phonics and their students with their professional experience to make wise decisions." Principals and higher-ups need to allow for and support variation. Differentiation is a challenge for teachers of alphabetic languages around the world, say Reinking and Reinking, "but the deep complexity of letter-to-sound correspondence in English amplifies its influence on instruction and increases the need for accommodating differences in background and readiness."

• *Expecting and accommodating debate and controversy* – "The complexity of phonics in English creates a large space for debate and controversy," say the authors. Countries with phonetically regular languages don't have these debates, nor do they have periodic national commissions on teaching reading, state laws mandating a particular phonics approach, ongoing academic debates, or fierce competition among publishers and consultants. All this stems from the unique, baked-in complexity of phonics in English – and also, the authors believe, because of an assumption that phonics in English is no more complex than with other alphabetic languages.

It isn't, and that's the heart of the matter, conclude Reinking and Reinking. The "central issue of phonics in learning to read in English is carefully and strategically managing its complexity… There is not one, but many reasonable ways to deal with it. It also suitably

makes room for professional judgment grounded in teachers' knowledge of their own students and in their professional experience, both the successes and the inevitable failures."

"Why Phonics (in English) Is Difficult to Teach, Learn, and Apply: What Caregivers and Teachers Need to Know" by David Reinking and Sharon Reinking in *Journal of Reading Recovery*, Fall 2022 (Vol. 22, #1, pp. 5-19); the authors can be reached at david.reinking@uga.edu; summarized in Marshall Memo 986

Back to page one

11. Effective Early Literacy Instruction for African-American Students

In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Julie Washington and Carla Burrell Stanford (University of California/Irvine) and Ryan Lee-James (Atlanta Speech School) say that students who speak African-American English (AAE) need primary-grade teachers to differentiate phonics instruction "while simultaneously affirming African-American children's identities, acknowledging and celebrating the language strengths they bring to the classroom." The same is true of ELLs and children who come to school with regional and cultural dialects that differ from the language of instruction in morphology, syntax, phonology, and more.

Not all African-American children speak African-American English; the degree to which they do is directly linked to the dialect spoken by family members and caregivers. For many African-American children, their first formal encounter with General American English is when they enter school. "This is particularly true," say Washington, Stanford, and Lee-James, "for children growing up in poverty, who may have limited experiences outside of their communities and thus, have been exposed primarily to AAE." They have the task of understanding and learning the school's language in order to be successful in reading, writing, and other academic subjects. That involves becoming bidialectical – or, if they know another dialect from their community, multidialectical.

When children enter school, they already have 4-5 years of oral language experience. "Language is an important means of transmitting linguistic and cultural beliefs and signaling membership in a group that shares the same culture, values, and beliefs as the child," say the authors. "Importantly, school represents a new and separate speech community with its own rules and expectations for how language and meaning will be transmitted. Some children will find that their home language practices integrate seamlessly with the language of school (and text), whereas for other children, including some AAE speakers, the school language context may require acculturation to a new language community and require learning the communication norms that exist within the school environment."

Washington, Stanford, and Lee-James list some of the language differences that present challenges for African-American English-speaking students as they learn to read in school:

- Vowel shifts – for example, *pen* pronounced *pin*
- Consonant cluster reduction – for example, *fist* pronounced *fis*
- Consonant substitution – for example, *bath* pronounced *baf*

These and other features of African-American English differ systematically from the academic language of instruction. "Children must rely on their established knowledge of the sound

system to make connections between speech and print," say the authors. "Discrepancies between spoken and written words can be a source of uncertainty for AAE speakers navigating two distinct language systems. Teaching approaches that support children as they navigate these differences, including providing more practice and time, will be important for developing strong phonological representations from oral language to print."

These language/dialect differences are why many African-American children have to work extra hard in school, translating the language of their home and community to academic proficiency. Dialect speakers "require more practice and exposure to integrate print and oral language to support reading," say the authors, working through the features in print school reading materials that contrast with their oral dialect. This is particularly true for "high-density dialect speakers," for whom there is the greatest difference between home and school language patterns. It's not being a dialect speaker that affects reading achievement, say the authors. "Rather, it is the distance between oral dialect and print that appears to matter most."

Teachers who grasp this see why some students are having difficulty during reading lessons. A white teacher described asking a six-year-old student to say the word *gold* and the boy said *gol* – but he quickly asked if the teacher was talking about what a leprechaun finds or scoring a *goal* in soccer. The teacher complimented him for being a good "word detective" and showed the difference between the two words and played a "listening game to train our ears to think about all the sounds in words and connect them to meaning." This interaction, said the teacher, was pivotal in her understanding of how certain features of African-American English differ from General American English, allowing her to do a better job teaching all her students.

Washington, Stanford, and Lee-James conclude with these recommendations for educators teaching reading to African-American students:

• *Learn about African-American English*. Having a detailed understanding of this dialect allows teachers (like the one above) to help students bridge the differences and become bidialectical, proficient readers. It's important for teachers to be "knowledgeable about how to leverage students' existing language strengths to scaffold and support learning," say the authors.

• *Focus on early language milestones*. What should children know about language at age 4, 5, 6, and 7? If students aren't meeting expected benchmarks, why? Is it dialect, learning disabilities, vocabulary, background knowledge, motivation, or something else? "The task for the teacher, and perhaps the speech-language pathologist," say the authors, "is to discern and address early language weaknesses before they negatively affect reading development."

• *Understand that systematic instruction in decoding is necessary but not sufficient*. "The goal of reading is to derive meaning from text," say Washington, Lee-James, and Stanford. "Children who learn to effectively 'crack the code' (i.e., decode words) have achieved a necessary, foundational, early reading skill. But word reading alone is not sufficient to support comprehension of larger text units, such as sentences and paragraphs… Mastering decoding processes allows readers to shift their time and attention away from the need to laboriously decode individual words and phrases toward processing the ideas and gaining meaning from the stories that they read. Current research suggests that in the absence of this

time and practice, African-American children may be developing shallow rather than deep knowledge of words and word reading that is not sufficient to sustain them into the older grades."

"Teaching Phonemic and Phonological Awareness to Children Who Speak African-American English" by Julie Washington, Carla Burrell Stanford, and Ryan Lee-James in *The Reading Teacher*, April 11, 2023; the authors can be reached at julie.washington@uci.edu, rjames@atlantaspeechschool.org, and cbstanfo@uci.edu; summarized in Marshall Memo 985

Back to page one

PULLING THE STRANDS TOGETHER

12. The Reading Brain

"A large, fundamental mistake," says Maryanne Wolf (University of California/Los Angeles) in this *Phi Delta Kappan* article, "– with many unfortunate consequences for children, teachers, and parents around the world – is the assumption that reading is natural to human beings and that it will simply emerge 'whole cloth' like language when the child is ready." In fact, she says, reading is an "unnatural cultural invention," barely 6,000 years old. On the clock of human evolution, that's a second before midnight.

Fortunately, the brain is highly adaptable (neuroplastic) and has tremendous capacity (there are as many connections in one cubic centimeter of the brain as there are stars in the Milky Way galaxy). That's why humans have been able to manage reading in addition to everything else we do. Taught well, the brain is able to master the elaborate "circus" of reading, says Wolf, "with three large overlapping rings (representing vision, language, and cognition), connected to two smaller rings (motor and affective functions), all of which are overseen by an 'executive center' that handles attention, memory, hypothesis generating, and decision making." It takes the whole brain to handle all that!

Recent research findings, combined with previous insights, allow schools to immediately assess which of six developmental profiles describes an entering kindergarten student. New assessment batteries make it possible for teachers and parents to understand exactly what each child needs to become a proficient reader:

- Children in two of the profiles have average or above-average skills and need only good instruction to excel.
- Other children have difficulty with letters and sounds, probably because they've had little exposure to the alphabet or the English language; they respond quickly if instruction targets these deficits. (Some children in this group may have visual-based difficulties and need further testing.)
- Three of the profiles include children who have some form of reading disability or dyslexia.

"There are few discoveries more important to those of us who study dyslexia," says Wolf, "than to be able to predict it before the child has had to endure ignominious, daily public

failures before peers, parents, and teachers… By assessing struggling young readers early on, we can prevent some of the emotional detritus that often characterizes their reading experiences… Nothing in reading acquisition is more important than beginning systematic, targeted intervention as early as possible."

"Some children, particularly boys, show no obvious areas of weakness in their profile but are simply not yet ready to learn to read," Wolf continues. "Understanding this group requires more in-depth evaluation (to ensure that there are no underlying weaknesses) and also more-reasonable expectations for our children than is sometimes the case… Some children are pushed to read too hard too soon, before they are developmentally ready… The bottom line is that fears about third-grade state test results should never dictate decisions about when whole kindergarten classes receive instruction for reading." Many children in Europe are taught to read in their equivalent of first grade, and the evidence is that they learn with fewer problems.

Wolf laments that the phonics/whole language reading war ("the debate that never should have been") is still raging in some quarters. It's not either/or, she says; children need systematic instruction on the basics of reading *and* early, deep immersion in stories, authentic literature, word meanings, and creativity. Recently developed assessments allow teachers to see which rungs on the developmental reading ladder a child between ages 5 and 10 might be missing:

- Phonemes and their connections to letters;
- The meanings and functions of words and morphemes in sentences;
- An immersion in stories that require sophisticated deep-reading processes;
- Learning the meanings and grammatical uses of words in increasingly complex sentences;
- Learning about new letter patterns that reappear and help readers figure out word meanings;
- Making basic functions so practiced and automatic that children can focus their attention on increasingly more sophisticated comprehension;
- Expanding background knowledge;
- Regularly eliciting children's own thoughts and imagination in speaking and writing.

"All the rungs are important," says Wolf, "if we are to prepare children to become fluent readers who use both their imagination and their analytical capacities… Fluent reading involves knowing not only how words work but also how they make us feel. Empathy and perspective taking are part of the complex fabric of feelings and thoughts, whose convergence propels greater understanding… Deep reading is always about connection: connecting what we know to what we read, what we read to what we feel, what we feel to what we think, and how we think to how we live out our lives in a connected world."

"The Science and Poetry in Learning (and Teaching) to Read" by Maryanne Wolf in *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2018/January 2019 (Vol. 100, #4, p. 13-17), https://bit.ly/2BP63jT; Wolf can be reached at maryanne@maryannewolf.com; summarized in Marshall Memo 767

Back to page one

13. Differentiating Through Four Stages of Students' Reading Development

In this *Phi Delta Kappan* article, Melanie Kuhn (Purdue University) and Katherine Dougherty Stahl (New York University) say most primary-grade classrooms have readers with a variety of needs. If teachers target one component of reading at a time (decoding, fluency, comprehension, motivation), say Kuhn and Stahl, instruction will be lopsided, "causing students to get stuck in their reading development rather than making the progress they should." The key to getting all students to read proficiently is for teachers to "teach flexibly and respond to differing student needs… to think about language, vocabulary, content, and the mechanics of literacy development simultaneously, rather than in opposition to one another."

Kuhn and Stahl believe the components of reading (and writing and language development) should support each other, beginning from a child's earliest interactions with text and continuing throughout a reader's life." Here's how that plays out in the stages of children's development as readers:

• *Emergent literacy* – Young children at this stage (preschool and before) hear words spoken around them, notice environmental print, are read to, and become familiar with how books work: title and author, letters forming words, words separated by spaces, left-to-right progression, pages turning as a story unfolds. Children learn these concepts about print through:

- Intentional instruction – learning letters and the sounds they make, stretching out the sounds of words, practicing letter recognition;
- Reading and play – rhyming words, playground clapping games, nursery rhymes, stories, poems, and predictable books;
- Early writing – reinforcing the alphabetic principle and the connection between sounds and words on the page;
- Oral language development – telling stories with a beginning, middle, and end and broadening vocabulary;
- Background knowledge – Exposure to informational texts and their unique features.

All this lays the groundwork for students' book reading skills in the years ahead.

• *Novice readers* – At this stage (often first grade), the focus shifts to actual decoding, which needs to be systematic, purposeful, and differentiated (with groupings within the classroom and scaffolding by the teacher). "Because most students need a lot of support learning to blend sounds into words," say Kuhn and Stahl, "much of the reading at this point involves relatively simple material with an emphasis on familiar content, regular word patterns, and a limited number of high-frequency words." Decodable texts are helpful, but students should also be exposed to poems, texts with controlled vocabulary, predictable texts, books with conversational language, and simple informational material. Readalouds should be used for picture and chapter books and more-challenging informational texts – for enjoyment and to build vocabulary and conceptual knowledge.

Writing has a reciprocal relationship with early reading and the two are mutually supportive. "There is no need to wait for phonemic awareness to be fully established before asking students to compose," say Kuhn and Stahl. "In fact, allowing them to use inventive, or

phonemic, spelling will increase their developing letter-sound knowledge. At the same time, there is no sound reason to push instruction too early." Some preschools have students learn the 100 most-common high-frequency words, which is "developmentally inappropriate," say the authors, "and can lead to frustration and even anxiety that hinders their development."

Teachers also need to continue expanding students' vocabulary, comprehension strategies, and conceptual understanding by reading aloud and discussing more-complex material, high-quality literature, and informational texts. The more topics and genres are used, and the more they connect to students' interests, the greater the chance of motivating all students to do the daily work of becoming proficient readers. "Luckily," say Kuhn and Stahl, "there are far more selections on a larger range of topics available for novice readers than there used to be, making it easier to lay the base for successfully reading an assortment of complex texts across a variety of categories."

• *Transitional readers* – The focus at this stage (often second and third grade) is making word recognition increasingly automatic (freeing up working memory to focus on meaning) and improving prosody (appropriate pacing, phrasing, emphasis, and pitch). Teachers can support these by continuing to expose students to a variety of texts at the upper end of their instructional level (85-90 percent accuracy), tuning in to students' individual needs, and scaffolding instruction by having students read with a partner, engage in choral reading, and echo the teacher's oral reading. These have been shown to be more effective than the often-discussed practice of repeated reading, say Kuhn and Stahl.

Some teachers overemphasize reading speed, which can impede students' development of important components of comprehension. "Unless instruction incorporates all the elements of fluency," say the authors, "some students will experience a new set of difficulties with their reading development." Their decoding may remain slow and inefficient, they'll rely too much on context, and sense-making will suffer. "What is important at this stage," they say, "is that students spend substantial amounts of time reading connected texts, with and without scaffolding, to ensure that they transfer what they are learning about word recognition to their reading." This can be accomplished by whole-class instruction, large and small groups, dyads and triads, reading along with audio recordings, reading widely for enjoyment, and reading and writing across the curriculum, including in science and social studies classes. All of this builds background knowledge, conceptual understanding, enjoyment, and the desire to read more and more.

• *Post-transitional readers* – At this stage (upper-elementary grades and beyond), students are increasingly proficient at decoding and fluency and can read independently and understand material with increasing amounts of content; there's more classroom emphasis on vocabulary and knowledge development in the content areas. "However," say Kuhn and Stahl, "mechanics should not be entirely set aside." An effective curriculum should include (with less classroom time than in the lower grades) the structure of words (morphology) and "situational fluency" – understanding the importance of varying pace and tone depending on the material and the purpose for reading. Students will be stronger readers at the post-transitional stage if they have been exposed to plenty of informational texts in the lower grades. Without that

foundation of conceptual knowledge and vocabulary, students who appear to be proficient readers in third grade may struggle when they encounter more substantive material.

Kuhn and Stahl's closing message: "Many of the disputes surrounding best practices are the result of taking what is appropriate for some children and applying it to all learners… Given the complexities of learning to read, it is essential to consider how reading develops broadly, the role of each component of reading throughout a reader's development, and the reality that not all readers develop in every area at the same rate." So if some students are reading in first grade, there's no reason to include them in whole-class decoding instruction. Alternatively, if some third graders are still struggling with blending letter-sounds into words, working with a group of students with similar needs (or providing one-on-one attention) will be more effective than addressing the issue with the whole class. Of course, there are plenty of situations where teaching the whole class is best: hearing a book read aloud, choral-reading a poem, a classroom discussion.

"By carefully considering both the reading process and the needs of learners," say Kuhn and Stahl, "it becomes possible not only to improve reading instruction, but also to increase the likelihood that every student will develop as a skilled reader."

"Teaching Reading: Development and Differentiation" by Melanie Kuhn and Katherine Dougherty Stahl in *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 2022 (Vol. 103, #8, pp. 25-31); the authors can be reached at melaniek@purdue.edu and kay.stahl@nyu.edu; summarized in Marshall Memo 939

Back to page one

14. Toward an Integrated Approach

(Originally titled "The Sciences of Reading Instruction")

"When it comes to reading instruction, an 'all or nothing' approach is actually unscientific," says Rachael Gabriel (University of Connecticut) in this article in *Educational Leadership*. Seeking a middle ground, Gabriel suggests these non-negotiables for effective reading instruction:

- Students get developmentally appropriate, explicit instruction in every strand: letter patterns, vocabulary, usage, and comprehension.
- There's clear modeling, plenty of practice, and specific feedback.
- Students do lots of reading and writing.
- There's code-focused (phonics) instruction: letter sounds, patterns, and word structures.
- There's meaning-focused instruction: vocabulary, text structure, discourse, genre, and communication patterns.
- Most important, there's an effective *integration* of code-focused and meaning-focused instruction.

The reading wars between phonics and meaning have been going on for decades, says Gabriel; the pendulum swings back and forth. Teachers need guidance on making sense of what they're hearing.

In her graduate literacy education classes, Gabriel uses a tree's growth to illustrate the mindsets of different literacy educators. She likens phonics proponents to *soil scientists*

because they talk about the key elements that nurture healthy growth. "Using my tree metaphor," she says, "building basic skills is like focusing on the right nutrients and balance within the soil to support the proliferation of skills (roots) that can fuel initial growth…"

Educators who focus on meaning and comprehension are like *botanists*, interested in how the tree is nurtured as it grows. Gabriel says this includes "sunlight (language exposure) and water (compelling reasons for reading and exposure to a wide range of text types)." As a tree grows, it sprouts branches and leaves that "provide increased surface area for capturing nutrients from the environment, until the *leaves* become the main source of nutrients for the tree and its roots."

Like trees, says Gabriel, no two students are the same, so in reading instruction "there's a time for a focus on the 'soil' and a time to focus on nutrients in the environment (texts, talk, and teaching that's explicitly about meaning making). A scientific approach to teaching reading would acknowledge that, like a sapling, every student has within them the natural ability to develop literacy. It would acknowledge that each unique student will require different kinds and degrees of support for component skills and the many processes of literacy… It's more appropriate to talk about the *sciences* of reading. A myopic focus on just one field leads to deficiencies in one area or another – for teachers and students."

This raises the issue of teachers' mastery of such a broad repertoire. Some are stronger at phonics, others at meaning – and there's a demographic pattern. The code-focused approach, says Gabriel, has been most common in under-resourced schools dealing with a revolving door of inexperienced teachers who can be quickly trained in a scripted literacy program. The meaning-focused, unscripted approach is more common "in better-resourced schools with experienced teachers who were trusted to make their own instructional decisions."

Lack of good phonics instruction "is surely a social justice issue," says Gabriel. A foundation in those skills is essential to achievement in the upper grades. "Yet teaching students to recognize words without also teaching them to integrate, interpret, apply, judge, critique, and construct arguments about or with them is an example of systematic oppression. If literacy is to liberate, its components must fully integrate."

How can a school know if it's providing enough phonics? Gabriel suggests the following criteria:

- At the end of first grade, 80 percent of all students, including those getting special education, can read simple texts independently.
- At the end of third grade, 80 percent of all students can read complex texts with understanding.
- Those requiring more support show progress with interventions lasting 3-4 months.
- If more than 20 percent of students need interventions, and for most students the interventions take longer than a few months, the phonics program has missed the mark.

"The Sciences of Reading Instruction" by Rachael Gabriel in *Educational Leadership*, May 2021 (Vol. 78, #8, pp. 58-64); Gabriel can be reached at rachael.gabriel@uconn.edu; summarized in Marshall Memo 887

Back to page one

15. Finding Common Ground

In the third of a series of *Literacy Research Association* articles, Maren Aukerman (University of Calgary) says there is actually a lot of common ground between the two sides of the current early literacy debate: "Balanced literacy" advocates believe there's an important role for phonics, and "science of reading" proponents increasingly acknowledge the need for instruction beyond decoding. Yet the media keeps talking about a "reading war" and people are pushed into polarized positions and are less likely to listen to one another.

What we should be talking about instead, Aukerman concludes, is outcomes, methods, equity, differentiation, and values:

- *Outcomes* – What kinds of readers should we be developing? What is the role of fluency, critical thinking, and imagination?
- *Methods* – What are the pros and cons of different methods of teaching and assessing decoding, comprehension, and students' motivation?
- *Equity* – How do we ensure that emerging bilingual students and other historically marginalized populations learn to read with understanding?
- *Student variation* – When and how should we differentiate for students with reading disabilities, gifted learners, or those with ADHD?
- *Values* – Do we embrace the importance of children finding reading and writing engaging and meaningful?

"All of these conversations should be informed by the wealth of perspectives and research that the field of reading has to offer," says Aukerman. "Reading educators and other stakeholders all want children to read well, after all, and we need each other's voices, perspectives, and research in conversation, rather than in battle, in order to best make that happen."

"The Science of Reading and the Media: How Do Current Reporting Patterns Cause Damage?" by Maren Aukerman in *Literacy Research Association*, December 17, 2022; Aukerman can be reached at maren.aukerman@ucalgary.ca; summarized in Marshall Memo 997.

If you have feedback or suggestions, please e-mail kim.marshall48@gmail.com

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This weekly memo is designed to keep principals, teachers, superintendents, and other educators very well-informed on current research and effective practices in K-12 education. Kim Marshall, drawing on 48 years' experience as a teacher, principal, central office administrator, writer, and consultant lightens the load of busy educators by serving as their "designated reader."

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American Educational Research Journal
American Educator
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ASCA School Counselor
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Harvard Educational Review
Independent School
Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy
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Social Studies and the Young Learner
Teachers College Record
Teaching Exceptional Children
The Atlantic
The Chronicle of Higher Education
The Journal of the Learning Sciences
The Language Educator
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The New York Times
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