Both printed texts and digital readers have their places in a 3rd grade classroom at Indian Run Elementary School in Dublin, Ohio.

What We Now Know: Literacy

EDITOR’S NOTE
As the world advances with technology students need different skills within literacy. In this Spotlight, review ways students can be supported; evaluate the struggles often seen when tech intertwines with literacy; and gain insight on how digital reading can positively impact learners.

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How Should Reading Be Taught in a Digital Era?

By Liana Loewus

With the many enhancements to mobile devices, multimedia websites, e-books, interactive graphics, and social media, there’s no question that the nature of reading has changed during the past decade.

But has the way reading is taught in elementary schools changed as well? And what should teachers be doing to get students ready for the realities of modern reading?

For now, there’s no consensus on exactly how digital skills should be incorporated into literacy instruction. Practitioners have few guidelines, and many are simply adapting their lessons as they see fit. But many literacy experts do agree on at least one thing: that all students should be learning with a mix of print and digital texts—even the very youngest.

“Just like we teach nonfiction and fiction at a very young age, I think we can talk to preschoolers and kindergartners about different kinds of texts—this is one where we turn the pages, and this is one where we click on the different pages,” said Kristen Hawley Turner, an associate professor of English education and contemporary literacies at Fordham University.

Exposing students to both print and digital reading early on in school is a way of reflecting what authentic reading looks like, many said.

“It is the way people read, write, communicate, and learn in the world, so kids should be learning it from the beginning,” said Bridget Dalton, an associate professor of literacy studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder. “You don’t wait till they’re proficient in one to do the other. It’s a simultaneous development.”

But unfortunately, experts said, the transition to that way of instruction has been slow going in many places. The word “reading” in elementary classrooms often still refers mainly to print.

According to survey data from the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress, only about 3 in 10 4th graders use computers to access reading-related websites on a daily basis or nearly every day at school. About 30 percent of students in 4th grade classrooms never, or hardly ever, use computers to access such reading material in school.

“Think about what happens in the real world, and school is not there, regrettably,” Turner said.

Brenda LeClerc, an elementary reading specialist in Lincoln, R.I., who attended a digital-literacy institute at the University of Rhode Island, said students in her classes have generally read “really only print-based materials.” She is working to expand her own digital skills because “everything outside of school is not print-based for the most part,” she said. “I feel like I need to be more comfortable with it.”

Where to Go for Digital Nonfiction Reading

Rather than having students freely surf the web, many teachers say they send students to handpicked education sites to read and do research on nonfiction topics. These popular sites all have free content, though some offer additional features for a fee.

Wonderopolis

Created by the National Center for Families Learning, this website has daily articles about interesting phenomena in science, social studies, math, and other subject areas, including answers for questions like, “Why are flamingos pink?”

wonderopolis.org

Newsela

This website takes the daily news and makes it student-friendly, adapting each article for five different reading levels.

newsela.com

BrainPOP

This group of websites features short, animated videos on topics in science, social studies, English, math, the arts, health, and engineering.

brainpop.com

The Kids Should See This

This library of more than 2,500 educational videos, curated from across the internet, has the tag line “not-made-for-kids, but perfect for them.” The videos cover a range of topics, though the site has an emphasis on science, technology, engineering, arts, and math.

thekidshouldseethis.com

Tween Tribune

Hosted by the Smithsonian, this free website, geared toward 8- to 15-year-olds, is updated daily with high-interest news articles at four different reading levels.

tweentribune.com

Print Skills Plus

Adding digital reading to the already-tough task of teaching elementary students foundational print skills can be daunting, though.

Even students born in a digital age need to learn a host of new skills, including how to operate the devices, navigate online tools, manage distractions, and maintain their own safety and privacy.

“It’s challenging. As teachers, we’re just realizing how much our own reading and writing lives have changed,” said Franki Sibberson, a 3rd grade teacher in Dublin, Ohio, and the vice president of the National Council of Teachers of English.

One of the best ways to teach technical skills is through modeling, many said. Teachers can show students how to use technology by...
using it themselves and talking out the process.

“This week, we might be reading a paper book [for a read aloud], and next week, I might read something off my Kindle,” said Kristin Ziemke, a 1st grade teacher at the Academy of St. Benedict the African in Chicago, who also consults with other urban schools as a learning-innovation specialist. “I want them to see what it looks like to turn the page, to go back.”

Students, especially the youngest ones, don’t each need their own device to do that, either. “One device and the projector changes everything for kids and for teachers,” she said.

The transition from looking at words and text in print to viewing it on screen isn’t hard at all for young students, said Karen Pelekis, a 1st grade teacher in Scarsdale, N.Y. “It’s just a natural extension of how they already see the world. It’s what they’re already exposed to.”

Teachers can also use modeling to show young children how to navigate an online space, such as a web-based article with hyperlinks and multimedia.

“We talk about text features in books—indentation, the big first letter at the beginning of a chapter, what a chapter means,” said William L. Bass II, the innovation coordinator for instructional technology, information, and library media for the Parkway district in Chesterfield, Mo. “But what about those text features that are inside of web pages? What is this underlined blue thing? Why did the author choose to make that a link?”

Nonlinear Texts

Perhaps the biggest difference between print and online reading is that the latter introduces decisionmaking.

“Print reading is very much there’s a dead end—it’s isolated reading,” said Katharine Hale, the instructional-technology coordinator at Gunston Middle School in Arlington, Va. “Digital reading is more like a ‘choose your own adventure.’ You can click on something else and continue on again.”

In other words, reading goes from being a linear experience in print to being a nonlinear one online. Teachers need to be direct about that difference, experts said, showing students that sometimes it’s OK to stop and click on a link or watch a video in the middle of an article if it will help them understand the content better.

“We need to teach young children digital text is hyperlinked and networked, and you go from one place to another, and it’s not left to right,” said Turner. “I’ve had students successfully do that in early elementary by having them click on hyperlinks and talking about, where did that take me? The idea is being very explicit and not just assuming they have the knowledge.”

At the same time, students need to see that, while the format is different, the purpose of reading remains the same. “When you think about comprehension strategies, they work whether you’re reading a blog post or watching video or reading a print book,” said Sibberson, who co-wrote a book with Bass in 2015 called Digital Reading: What’s Essential in Grades 3-8.

Some studies have shown that students struggle more with comprehension on digital devices than print materials. A 2012 study by the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, a research organization for children’s digital media, found that 3- to 6-year-olds who read interactive e-books with their parents “recalled significantly fewer narrative details than children who read the print version of the same story.”

But some educators chalked that up to students not getting explicit instruction on how to navigate online text and transfer those print comprehension skills. “I once had a kid say, ‘I didn’t know we were allowed to think when we read online,’ ” said Sibberson. “They need to see it’s the same thing—sometimes with online stuff, they think of play.”

Young students also need instruction on how to self-regulate and manage distractions in the online world—when to ignore links, close tabs, and stay on one text or app rather than jumping around to others, for example.

“If you don’t start thinking early about managing distractions, you’re going to be building bad habits,” Fordham’s Turner said.

Search for Texts Online

Just as young students learn to choose books from the library, many experts said they should also learn to search for texts online. But, of course, surfing the web is rife with safety and privacy issues, so elementary students will need to do that in a more limited environment.

Pelekis sets up wiki pages with links related to whatever her 1st graders are studying—for instance, students can go there to get more information on chicks during a unit on the egg-to-chicken life cycle.

She avoids search engines altogether. “I know some people do [use them] but ... I did once, and it’s a bad mistake I’m not making again,” she said. Even YouTube’s education channel can turn up inappropriate content, she said. (And don’t even think about having students Google the word “chicks,” she mentioned offhandedly.)

That said, some teachers want to maintain authenticity in how students search for information online, both because they will need those skills later and because giving students a choice can motivate them to read.

“So often we say, go to National Geographic Kids, open the article on giraffes, and read it,” said Ziemke, who co-wrote a 2015 book called Amplify! Digital Teaching and Learning in the K-6 Classroom. “I noticed I wasn’t giving students that same choice piece with digital reading [as with print].”

Ziemke now recommends introducing 3rd graders and up to a half-dozen or so vetted educational websites, such as Wonderopolis and Tween Tribune, and giving them free time to search within those for texts they’d like to read.

By 5th grade, though, Bass says students should have opportunities to really search the web on their own.

Authentic Reading vs. Games

There are countless online games and apps available to help students practice their foundational reading skills—phonics, sight words, vocabulary, among them—and teachers have been using them for years. But digital-literacy
Almost everyone can get at least one device in the classroom whether through grants via DonorsChoose or from the district.”

LISA MAUCIONE
READING SPECIALIST
DARTMOUTH PUBLIC SCHOOLS, MASSACHUSETTS

For starters, there’s the issue of access to digital devices. Many teachers said they simply don’t have the internet-connected tools they need to get going with online reading.

“We do have iPad carts and laptop carts, but teachers have to sign up to use them, so you have to work around everyone else’s schedule,” said Lisa Maucione, a reading specialist for the Dartmouth public schools in Massachusetts, who also attended the digital-literacy institute at URI. “And if there’s testing, testing is the priority.”

But Turner said devices are the least of teachers’ problems. “Almost everybody can get at least one device in the classroom whether through grants via DonorsChoose or from the district,” she said. And students can learn the basics they need when a teacher projects the device on a screen and models how to use it.

A bigger issue is that teachers feel hamstrung by policies that don’t necessarily promote digital reading, some said. Standardized tests do take place on computers now in most states, but they don’t measure authentic digital skills, such as navigating websites and using search engines. And in many cases, because authentic online reading tasks aren’t being assessed, teachers in tested grades may not prioritize teaching them.

In addition, many elementary teachers are uncomfortable with their own technology skills, which makes them hesitant to start digital reading with students.

“For the most part, we were not trained as educators to teach kids who are reading in digital spaces—that’s not part of most teacher-prep courses,” said Bass, the innovation coordinator in Chesterfield. “We fall back and rely on the way we were taught, and that’s a barrier.”

There are also some mindsets that hold teachers back from teaching digital reading. “I’ve been in classrooms where it’s not happening at all,” said Ziemke, the 1st grade teacher and consultant. “There are people that are waiting it out [until they leave teaching] or saying, ‘I’m going to go to a school that’s not as techy.’”

And some educators are—understandably—still attached to the idea of falling in love with print books.

“There’s still something very magical about holding a book and being able to flip the page in your hands,” said Hale. “But reading isn’t just reading print text anymore. Reading is reading the world.”

Classroom Barriers

Needless to say, incorporating digital skills into early reading is easier in some situations than others.

Experts caution that there’s a difference between using games and having students do authentic online reading.

“People ask me what’s the best sight-word app for 2nd grade, and I say I don’t know, I don’t use tech like that,” said Ziemke. “I’m not against games by any means, but when I look at where we need to start, we can do so much with modeling daily work and authentic ways of using tech.”

Many games and apps aren’t much more than “soupied-up worksheets,” according to Hale, the instructional-technology coordinator in Virginia.

More-authentic digital-literacy instruction would have students working with the technology that readers and writers use all the time—blogs, social media, movie-making apps, bookmarking tools, audio recorders, virtual bulletin boards, and annotating tools, educators said.

“There are isolated skills you can learn nicely on the computer, but overall for me, reading is all about thinking, and the more I can get them to think, explore, be curious and interested, and have a desire to read and learn, the technology helps you be able to capture that and extend what they can do in the classroom,” said 1st grade teacher Pelekis.

Published on February 11, 2021

5 Ways to Remotely Support Students With Dyslexia

By Corey Mitchell

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the needs of students with dyslexia, but also made it more difficult to support them.

Some students have found that their support services, such as one-on-one or small-group reading sessions, have been disrupted by the need for social distancing. Others may bestraining to understand what their masked teachers are saying in class.

And, still others remain physically separated from the teachers that help them overcome the challenges presented by dyslexia, which is marked by readers’ struggles with recognizing and decoding words.

Because schools often don’t track it, there is no way to know how many students struggle specifically with dyslexia, which can lead to difficulty with reading comprehension. Under the federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the nation’s special education law, dyslexia is listed as an example of a disability under the broader term “specific learning disabilities.”

Part of the problem lies in the difficulty in diagnosis. Not all students with reading difficulties have dyslexia. Some students with dyslexia can go undiagnosed until late elementary, middle or even high school because they can conceal their struggles or find ways to compensate for them.

Education Week interviewed four experts to find out what advice they have for educators and parents who are working with students with dyslexia.

Here’s a look at what the experts had to say. Their statements have been edited for length and clarity:

1. Avoid asychronous learning

The experts universally agreed that students with dyslexia need direction, instruction, and real-time feedback that isn’t available during recorded lessons.
“The idea of asynchronous learning for dyslexic learners is not appropriate,” said Josh Clark, the head of school at The Schneck School, an Atlanta-based private school for children with dyslexia. He also serves as the executive director of The Dyslexia Resource, a nonprofit that focuses on dyslexia education and advocacy through teacher training, tutoring programs, and community partnerships.

“You know they’re already struggling in the traditional school environment. Then you expect them to navigate independently work they can intellectually access, but they can’t decode the instructions?”

Yvette Goorevitch, the chief of specialized learning and student services for Norwalk, Conn., schools, said her district has also avoided asynchronous instruction for students with dyslexia.

“There is a distinction between teaching children how to read and assigning reading. We have stayed away from asynchronous learning because it’s not direct instruction,” Goorevitch said. “There needs to be guided practice. Kids need feedback and immediate correction. They need independent practice, and then they need review. You’re constantly evaluating.”

2. Find new ways to support students who struggle

Students with dyslexia may not be comfortable discussing their difficulties in front of the class or signaling for help if they have trouble. Teachers should communicate how students and parents can ask for help or additional support.

“We sometimes have this misconception that this generation all really feels comfortable online,” said Donnell Pons, a reading and dyslexia specialist in Salt Lake City. “But that’s not always the case with someone who struggles with language difficulties. As a teacher, you have to have clear protocols for how students engage in the online classroom, like, ‘Is it clear how I communicate when I have difficulty?’”

For older students, Clark recommends teachers reach out directly to students.

“If you have a dyslexic learner in your classroom, it’s not something that we need to hide or not talk about or ignore,” Clark said. “Let’s have the conversation, especially for older students. Let’s have conversation about what works: ‘What would remove barriers for me to better understand what you know and you’re able to produce?’”

JOSH CLARK
HEAD OF SCHOOL AT THE SCHNECK SCHOOL, AN ATLANTA-BASED PRIVATE SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN WITH DYSLEXIA

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challenges that can make some tasks more difficult.

“As we’ve gone online, a lot of teachers have thought, ‘Oh, if we can’t be in-person having class discussions, I guess more reading and writing is called for,’” Pons said. “We need to evaluate putting more demands in the reading and writing area without understanding the needs of students with dyslexia. We need to be patient and understanding, reach out to students who seem to be disengaging and ask questions like ‘What is this workload like for you?’”

Students will also need help maintaining their focus as the pandemic stretches on. While students will benefit from in-person instruction, expecting them, dyslexic or not, to sit through six or seven hours of screen time is not the solution, said Goorevitch of the Norwalk schools.

“The challenge for the kids and for the staff has been, how do you inhibit the intrusion into the instructional day? If the kid is remote, you know the distractions that can happen at home,” Goorevitch said.

“There’s an intrusion into the natural flow (of the school day) that teachers need to plan for and overcome,” she added. “Students need real help in sustaining their efforts and developing the stamina to do the really hard work of learning to read, particularly when you have a learning disability or you’re dyslexic. The kids need that support as well as the direct explicit instruction.”

4. Take advantage of remote options

A school district that has five dyslexia specialists each with dozens of students to support may be able to use online learning to its advantage, even after the pandemic.

“If you can do things online, the breadth of resources is no longer limited by geography,” Clark said. “As long as you have an adult in the physical room, they don’t have to be the one delivering the instruction.”

The Norwalk school system operates a literacy center that focuses on early identification, assessment, and intervention for students with dyslexia. During the pandemic, the district has found new ways to connect students and staff.

“We’ve been able to pull together kids with similar needs from across the district and put them together in small remote groups and have our literacy and dyslexia specialists work with them very intensely,” Goorevitch said. “Rather than sending these specialists out to all our schools or pulling kids in from a variety of schools and (having them miss) instructional time, we have been able to come up with a good remote option to help them.”

5. Embrace assistive technology

With students with dyslexia spending more time in front of screens, whether at home or during in-person learning, schools should use tools, such as speech-to-text and text-to-speech functions, that can help them navigate lessons and complete assignments.

“I do think people are not so afraid of technology anymore. It levels the playing field for these students,” Pierson said. “If these kids aren’t reading the same text as their peers, they’re not getting that vocabulary.”

Clark, the chairman of the International Dyslexia Association Board of Directors, is dyslexic. Both of his children also have dyslexia.

“It’s just the idea of presenting multiple ways of gaining meaning,” Clark said. “So I could read an article, but I could also watch a YouTube video. That removes barriers to the knowledge so that more people can access it.”

Published on September 29, 2020

How to Use Digital Reading Programs During COVID-19. Teachers Still Matter

By Sarah Schwartz

Teaching the foundational skills of reading is often a lively and physical task: students clapping out the syllables in words and practicing letter sounds in chorus and teachers demonstrating the way that the mouth forms different shapes for different sounds. This year, though, it will likely look very different.

According to Education Week’s database of more than 900 districts, which is not nationally representative, 48 percent were doing all of their instruction remotely. Young students at these schools as well as those doing a mix of in-person and virtual instruction will be learning to read through screens—in virtual classrooms with their teachers, working on computer programs and apps, or through some combination of the two.

There’s a robust evidence base for how to teach children to read in person: Decades of research has shown that explicitly teaching students how letters correspond to spoken sounds—and teaching phonics—is the most effective way to help them learn to decode words. But there’s little evidence on how this best practice should be translated to the remote environment.

It is clear, though, that many teachers will be using different materials than they do in the classroom—finding resources that can support live teaching over Zoom, or relying more on digital reading programs.

Many companies offering core reading curricula have updated and expanded their digital offerings during remote learning. Schools and teachers should take the same steps to evaluate these resources that they would print materials, experts say.

Prior Education Week reporting has shown that some of the most popular curricula and interventions used in classrooms don’t teach letter-sound connections in a systematic way, raising the possibility that some students who are still learning the alphabetic code may be left with gaps in their understanding.

There are also adaptive, digital programs that students can work through independently. Some
The COVID-19 pandemic has abruptly forced schools, and education in general, to engage in a complete digital transformation. While educators are constantly seeking new ways to engage students and enhance learning, the need for digital solutions has grown exponentially.

Most districts last year were not prepared to confront the task of teaching remotely, and there was a large discrepancy between districts that had the resources to effectively transition to digital learning and those that did not. Schools that previously instituted key digital components — in the form of learning management systems, ebooks and audiobooks, and professional development protocols — fared better.

Most, if not all, schools have since invested in creating a digital infrastructure and training to better serve students and educators. This revolution within education was made possible by collaboration between schools through the sharing of best practices via virtual conferencing and webinars.

The impact of digital books on student engagement, data, equity and parental involvement has been overwhelmingly beneficial. These advancements have had a lasting effect on education, as digital instruction and assessment methods have become the new standards.

“The digital revolution we’ve been talking about for years has happened, and it’s been a pretty seismic shift for the education field,” OverDrive Education General Manager Angela Arnold said.
SUPPORTING CLASSROOM NEEDS FOR EDUCATORS, STUDENTS AND DISTRICTS

In terms of addressing immediate virtual needs, reading was one of the education sectors that experienced the most significant technology growth. Online reading platforms have answered the call as a resource that can be utilized anywhere to support learning goals.

In more than 38,000 schools across 71 countries, students engaged with digital books in 2020 via OverDrive Education’s Sora reading app at nearly triple the rate of 2019. Driven by the pandemic, this 80% year-over-year increase is the peak of a years-long trend toward greater digital book adoption and was seen in both school library and curriculum usage.

“Finding as many ways as possible to get books into the hands of students has always been important, but during the pandemic, it took on a critical new dimension as schools were forced to transition to remote learning. On nearly all fronts, digital books simplified the logistics of delivering required and recommended books to students,” Arnold said.

Districts have seamlessly integrated Sora into their existing tech ecosystems by taking advantage of popular app features, including universal device compatibility, single sign-on options through top learning management (LMS) and student information systems, and the ability to deliver assignments from within the app or their LMS. This has removed barriers to reading.

Educators are using Sora in ways they hadn’t before, leveraging digital class sets (one title that can be deployed to many students at a time for as long as it’s needed); bolstering digital collections for recreational reading to combat boredom for homebound students; supporting English-as-a-Second-Language and other bilingual learners with diverse digital collections; and continuing to deliver professional development resources to teachers.

Furthermore, digital books through Sora have proven to be an effective tool to facilitate group reading, including summer reading programs, grade-wide reads and book clubs.

Students also have embraced Sora’s innovative features, discovering new ways to engage with reading through digital books. They’re participating in active reading through exportable notes and highlights and sharing their favorite reads on social media with Sora’s simple deep linking tools. By using Sora, they’re building key digital literacy skills crucial to future academic and career success.
Districts have discovered that the Sora app is so much more than a digital book collection. They’re fully leveraging Sora’s innovative feature set to:

**SELECT REQUIRED TITLES**
When teachers use Sora to provide digital reading options to their classrooms, they gain the ability to assign titles and provide students 24/7 access to required materials. In addition, through Sora’s Public Library CONNECT option, students can access age-appropriate ebooks and audiobooks from the local public library along with their school’s digital collection, exponentially increasing their access to reading.

**ASSIGN TITLES**
Sora allows for titles to be automatically checked out and returned on specific dates, ensuring that the correct text is accessible to all students for the right amount of time. Individual student reading levels remain protected for enhanced privacy.

**USE SORA WITH EXISTING LMS**
Sora makes it simple for students and educators to access digital books within their school’s existing edtech infrastructure. Integrations like the Sora + Google built-in share feature can streamline the process even more, enabling educators to share titles or curated book collections directly to Google Classroom. In 2020 alone, this feature was used over 7,000 times.

**USE DIGITAL CLASS SETS**
If your school requires short-term, high-volume access to a single work, Sora’s digital class sets can be used to efficiently and cost-effectively meet your students’ reading needs. With Sora, schools can purchase only the access they need, streamlining collection management and making more efficient use of budget. Title distribution is almost immediate, and educators can seamlessly obtain reading data for assigned titles to more effectively analyze how students engage with the content. Furthermore, this solution eliminates the drawbacks associated with physical class sets, including book loss and damage.

**WORK INSIDE DIGITAL BOOKS IN CLASS AND AT HOME**
Sora doesn’t just allow students to borrow digital books. It also gives them the ability to seamlessly create in-app notes and highlights and look up definitions. Annotations can then be exported to the teacher, making it easy for students and educators to focus on specific text sections during lessons, while definitions enable students to spearhead their own learning and discovery. Looking up an unfamiliar word is effortless with a few taps of the finger, which means less frustration and resistance from students. In addition, students and educators can share titles directly using Sora’s support for deep linking.

**ANALYZE STUDENT DATA**
Educators with appropriate permissions can access student-level reading data for title assignments and class sets for authorized educational purposes. This data includes total reading time, number of reading sessions and more, offering valuable insight into a student’s reading progress and development.
EMBRACING DIGITAL BOOKS AND THE BEST OF REMOTE LEARNING INTO THE FUTURE

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms like Sora have proven their worth, providing ease-of-use and reliability in serving the reading needs of students of all ages and abilities, for a myriad of applications. Though conventional wisdom says the hardest part of switching to ebooks and audiobooks is changing behaviors, students and educators across the board have shown an ability to adapt and innovate by embracing digital reading.

“Many schools that went all in with digital books saw increases in reading proficiency and time spent reading. A lot of this improved traction is related to schools’ innovative use of digital books,” Arnold said.

Looking forward to a post-pandemic world, Sora opens up new learning opportunities for districts looking to further leverage the digital investments they made to accommodate remote learning. By embracing Sora and digital books as key classroom tools in the years ahead, districts will be better equipped to engage student readers, measure reading success and stretch their library and curriculum budgets further.

Ready to transform your remote learning investment into a sustained culture of learning innovation in your district? Contact your OverDrive Education Account Manager or schools@overdrive.com to develop your plan for using Sora for literacy achievement in the classroom.

SORA IN ACTION

Brad Wieher is the director of literacy and interventions at East Aurora School District 131 in Illinois. Sora is used districtwide for K-12 students — with an uptick in users since the COVID-19 pandemic forced remote learning in place.

“Our recent data shows over 900 new users of Sora this school year alone,” Wieher said. “That is 900 students who have chosen to check out books on Sora for the very first time in order to read for pleasure while home during a pandemic.”

The district is now also leveraging Sora as its virtual curricular solution, with students in grades 6-12 accessing their assigned English Language Arts reading through the app.

East Aurora also made sure all English and reading teachers had their own copies of the ebooks so they could share their virtual classroom screens as needed and read aloud with students and model their own thinking and learning along the way.

“In the past, Sora has been a way for students to check out library ebooks and read them at home for pleasure. Now, in addition to that, Sora has become synonymous with being our main virtual curricular platform for delivering English and reading classroom novels to both students and teachers so that they can continue reading and learning,” Wieher said.

ABOUT OVERDRIVE EDUCATION

OverDrive Education is the leading global digital reading platform for K-12, offering the industry’s largest catalog of ebooks, audiobooks and streaming video. As a 100% digital company serving 65,000 libraries and schools worldwide, OverDrive combines technology with content to support learning and reading in the classroom, library and home on all major devices, including iOS, Android, Chromebook and Kindle (U.S. only). Sora, the student reading app, was named one of TIME’s Best Inventions of 2019.

sponsored by OverDrive Education
of these programs do align with evidence-based methods, said David Liben, a literacy expert and advisor to Student Achievement Partners, a nonprofit consulting group. They follow a scope and sequence and are systematic.

Still, he said, they haven’t been designed to be used as core instruction. If students aren’t also getting strong foundational skills instruction from a teacher, “then you’re not going to get good results from the supplementary program,” he said.

Most also haven’t been evaluated in a home-based setting, without a teacher present. Other tools teachers might use, like apps and digital books, vary widely in quality, researchers say.

When evaluating how to use some of these tools, and in what combination with live online teaching, “there are not hard and fast rules,” said Devin Kearns, an associate professor of special education at the University of Connecticut.

“This is where I would say you really need a teacher instead of an app, even if a teacher is using an app.... Teachers have a unique knowledge of kids—the specific kids, the environment—and a lot of skill in responding to immediate student needs that the programs still don’t have.”

**Digital Programs and Apps**

When teachers of young children do have the opportunity for some live interaction with students—over videoconference, for example—researchers suggest sticking to the kind of explicit, systematic instruction that has been proven effective for teaching how to read words in an in-person setting.

But many teachers won’t have the same amount of face-to-face time that they’ve had in previous years, and schools say they’re relying more on digital tools. In a nationally representative EdWeek Research Center survey, 63 percent of educators involved in K-2 reading said that they or the teachers they work with are using tech-based reading programs somewhat or much more frequently than they were before the school shutdowns.

The survey also asked which core and supplemental programs respondents had used to teach students how to read during remote learning. Two of the most popular resources were digital programs that target lessons to students based on the specific skills they need practice with: Lexia and iReady.

Both programs offer practice in phonemic awareness and phonics, as experts recommend, and collect data on student performance that teachers can use to tailor instruction outside of the platform. iReady also offers an assessment that is normed to performance on some state standardized tests. Lexia has conducted its own, peer-reviewed research on Lexia Core5, the company’s reading product for students in grades pre-K-5, which has shown positive effects on early reading skills.

Still, there are few independent studies of the program. Research on iReady’s instructional program has found that students who use it perform better on the iReady assessment, but hasn’t evaluated whether it raises student achievement on other measures.

In general, most research on technolo-
Technology-based programs for teaching early reading has looked at how effective these programs are in combination with classroom teaching.

One 2013 review from education researchers Alan C.K. Cheung of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins University looked at 20 studies spanning students in grades 1-6. The strongest effect sizes came from studies in which teachers worked with students in small group settings, using technology that was closely aligned to their curriculum. Cheung and Slavin found a smaller positive effect for stand-alone supplemental programs, like Lexia. On the whole, though, the average effect size across all studies was much stronger for younger students (grades 1-3) than older students.

Other papers have also made the case that teacher implementation, unsurprisingly, plays a big role in reading program effectiveness. Two meta analyses, from 2012 and 2014, both found that programs that included teacher training and support were more effective than those that did not. (These papers included studies with a range of K-12 students, though, not just young learners.)

It’s hard to know how effective digital reading programs will be if students are working through them at home. These programs are designed to be a part of, or a complement to, in-person instruction.

The effectiveness could be compromised, and there’s also the potential for students to feel isolated and withdraw from learning, said Timothy Shanahan, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago and an author of the National Reading Panel report.

“Trying to stretch these [programs] to be more than they are, more than intended, might be OK, but I’m worried about it,” he said.

Liz Brooke, the chief learning officer for Lexia, said that the company doesn’t recommend kids spend more time on the program at home than they would at school—the suggested limit for early readers is still 60 minutes a week, she said. Still, Brooke noted that usage went up this spring from previous years.

For stand-alone mobile apps, the research base is thinner. Studies have shown that it’s possible these tools can help children improve in foundational skills, like alphabet knowledge and word reading. But there are many choices, and quality varies greatly, Kearns said.

### Evaluating Digital Reading Materials

So how can teachers evaluate a program or app, or decide which parts of it to use? Kearns suggests that they start by looking for the core instructional components that they would expect in any in-person curriculum.

“I would look at the program … and say, does this include explicit, systematic phonics instruction? Do students learn individual letter sounds? Are they organized in a logical scope and sequence? Do students receive a lot of practice? Does it move from words to sentences to text?” Kearns said.

But even a well-designed digital program that follows a structured sequence can’t replicate the range of activities and feedback that teachers can provide face-to-face. Researchers identified three areas where apps and computer programs can fall short of in-person instruction, and offered suggestions for what to prioritize during synchronous teaching time.

#### 1. Types of Questions and Possibilities for Feedback

Computers are only able to assess certain types of knowledge. For example, there are different dimensions to “knowing” a letter, said Holly Lane, the director of the University of Florida Literacy Institute. A teacher could show a student several letters and ask, which one is the letter “a”? Or, the teacher could also show a student the written letter “a” and ask students to say the letter’s name.

These two questions are assessing different kinds of knowledge. But Lane said that digital programs tend to lean more heavily on the former—presenting two, or a series of options, for students to choose from. Given that, it’s also possible that students might be able to advance with lucky guesses and not get enough practice with skills that they’re still learning.

A teacher also has more options available for correcting a student mistake and figuring out why the child is making the error, said Natalia Kucirkova, a professor of early-childhood education who studies digital books at the University of Stavanger in Norway and a professor reading and children’s development at the Open University in the UK. Say a student uses the wrong /a/ sound in the word “cat.” A computer could note the answer as wrong, Kucirkova said, but it wouldn’t necessarily be able to explain why “cat” has a short “a” as well as a teacher could.

When students are still learning a new skill, it’s important that they have time to practice in front of a live teacher, not just with a program, Kearns said. “Any activity that is better when teachers provide feedback, or
when teachers listen to students and adjust instruction in the moment based on student response, that’s something that teachers are really essential for.”

2. Hearing Kids Read and Pronouncing Words

One of the reasons that digital programs rely on multiple-choice questions, Lane said, is that they can’t listen to kids pronounce words in the same way a teacher can.

“We are getting toward a point where you can have the computer listen to kids read, and the computer can determine whether the kid says the right word or not,” Kearns said, but most programs aren’t there yet.

Computers also expose students to a smaller range of word pronunciations. In a classroom, kids hear all of the slight variations in how their peers and their teachers say the same word; in a digital program, they often only get one example, said Kucirkova.

Lane raised another potential concern: Some digital programs include playback pronunciations for letters that are slightly off. For example, she said, the recorded voice sometimes pronounces the sound for the letter p as “puh,” exaggerating the sound to make it easier to hear. But adding the “uh” sound after /p/ distorts the letter’s actual sound, she said, and can make it harder for students to understand how to blend “p” into a word.

3. Differentiation Weaknesses in Online Reading Programs

While some digital reading programs call themselves “adaptive,” Kearns said, most don’t respond in the moment, moving a child forward or backward based on the answers to individual questions. Instead, they move students on at the end of whole units or sections of the program.

Even if teachers are using digital programs, it’s important that they’re still involved in initial diagnostic and continuous assessment practices, said Lane. That way, they can make sure that students aren’t starting with skills that they’ve already mastered, or haven’t skipped over ones that they need more practice with.

It’s also important to note that some programs don’t give teachers this choice. A 2015 analysis from the Joan Ganz Cooney Center looked at 183 literacy apps in popular app stores, and found that only 17 percent allowed users to select the difficulty level of the program.

4. Digital Books: Decodable vs. Leveled

In addition to tools for instruction and assessment, many teachers are looking for ways to give students virtual access to a classroom library.

In a traditional school setting, experts suggest, students who are just learning how to read should practice in decodable books. These short texts are written with a high proportion of words that are phonetically regular—meaning they follow common sound-spelling rules—and mostly include words with phonics patterns that children have already learned.

More commonly given to young children, though, are leveled texts. These are books categorized by their perceived difficulty. At the lowest levels, for kids who are just learning to read, these books often feature repetitive text patterns and literal illustrations. While they may include phonics patterns that children have already learned, they aren’t specifically designed to do so.

Some research has shown that which kind of text students are exposed to more often—decodable or leveled—can affect how they try to tackle words. Decodable text trains students to sound out words when they read, while predictable leveled text can encourage them to rely on other cues.

Still, decodable books are just one part of the diverse text diet that young students should get, researchers say. Kids should also be listening to stories read aloud and talking about them, which builds their vocabulary, knowledge, and comprehension skills. And they should have access to authentic texts that they can try to tackle as they build their decoding skills.

Outside of these general best practices for text selection, there are specific criteria to look for when judging the quality of digital books.

Digital books for children often come with more features than the standard adult e-reader. Many give the option to hear the story read to you, or to click on specific words and look up their definitions in kid-friendly dictionaries, said Kucirkova. These kinds of scaffolds can be helpful, she said, allowing children who are still developing their decoding skills, or are learning how to read English, to engage with complex stories.

But other technological enhancements are more like “bells and whistles,” Kucirkova said. Activities that take children’s attention away from the story—a game, or a drawing exercise, for example—can lower their ability to comprehend what they read. “It has to do with the cognitive load of the child. It becomes too much to process,” she said.

The International Collective of Research and Design in Children’s Books, of which Kucirkova is a member, offers a best practice design framework that has research-based guidelines for creating and identifying high-quality books.

In the EdWeek Research Center survey, two of the materials educators were most likely to say they were using to teach reading online were Epic! and Raz-Kids. Both of those essentially function like online libraries.

Epic! has decodable books and leveled readers both available, as well as other trade books. The site also offers audiobooks.

Raz-Kids is a leveled reading program that uses digital books. Teachers can assign books to students by reading level or on certain topics. The program also includes digital assessments: comprehension quizzes, rubrics that gauge a student’s ability to retell the story they read, and running records scored using the three-cueing system. (Raz-Kids has recently received criticism for books alleged to perpetuate racial stereotypes. Lisa O’Masta, the president of Learning A-Z, which...
Teacher knowledge and discernment is important in selecting books, no matter the source, said Kucirkova. Young children can also get more out of the reading experience, she said, if adults in the home are able to read with them. “It is the combination of the human and the digital scaffolding that makes the biggest difference for the child’s learning,” Kucirkova said.

Published on January 11, 2021

How Online Teaching Needs to Improve—Even After the Pandemic

By Mark Lieberman

Despite all the frustrations and struggles to make remote and hybrid learning work during COVID-19, many teachers have evolved their practices to an approach more tailored to individual students’ needs, and the vast majority say they’ve gained skills that they’ll continue to use after the pandemic ends, concludes a new report.

These are among the findings in surveys of teachers and administrators in a new report from the Clayton Christensen Institute, a nonprofit research organization that promotes innovation in education and other fields.

The data reinforce what many online learning advocates and experts have been saying since the pandemic started: the online learning that’s taken place doesn’t represent the best that it can be; most teachers were underprepared for abruptly switching to a new instructional model; and there are reasons to be hopeful that more robust online learning will remain viable for schools to offer in the long term.

“When people are frustrated with what’s happening in distance learning right now, it’s in some ways not surprising given the way that they’ve had to throw things together,” said Tom Arnett, the report’s author.

The report cites evidence that many teachers have tried to re-create the physical classroom experience for students by hosting long whole-group videoconference calls and sharing documents in the learning management system, approaches that are contrary to the advice of online learning experts. Slightly more than 40 percent of educators said their synchronous remote instruction, in which they’re “face to face” virtually with students, lasts as long as a regular school day.

At the same time, teachers’ workloads appear to have increased dramatically. Eighty-five percent of teachers said they spend more time than they used to on planning and preparation for the school day. That additional time might include navigating and troubleshooting technology platforms, tracking down remote students who have been absent or behind on their assignments, and developing new social-emotional learning activities to help students cope with the effects of an unfolding public health crisis.

The heavier workload also likely includes the time and energy required to create new instructional materials for these unprecedented circumstances. Survey data from the Christensen Institute shows nearly half of educators said their primary source for curriculum materials was their own efforts, and 87 percent of administrators said they expect teachers to use materials of their own making.

Hybrid teaching has emerged as the most popular approach to restore some classroom instruction while also allowing for some students to continue learning from home part- or full-time. But that mode isn’t substantially easier for teachers than offering instruction remotely full-time, according to the report. Asked to rate their ability to serve their students effectively on a scale from 0 to 100, in-person teachers said an average of 77, hybrid teachers said an average of 64, and teachers of fully remote students said an average of 59.

Identifying Possible Solutions

The status quo for remote teaching isn’t fixed in stone. The Christensen Institute offers several ideas for easing some of the biggest burdens teachers are experiencing.

State education departments should review curriculum materials specifically to determine which ones work best for online instruction, the report says. Teachers who are comfortable with online and student-centered teaching should be empowered to lead training sessions and coach their struggling colleagues.

The report also recommends that schools establish virtual programs with autonomous staff and leadership that tap into the resources and expertise of their conventional school.
We’ve seen the organizations that survive disruption and reinvent themselves, they start with an independent team building from a fresh slate, as opposed to a team that’s trying to build on a bunch of work they’re already doing.”

TOM ARNETT
AUTHOR

partners to “give students benefits that neither conventional schools nor virtual schools alone can offer.”

Arnett acknowledges that might be difficult to do in the near future given the K-12 system’s current budget woes and staffing challenges. But he believes virtual schools should follow the model of the Appleton eSchool, run by the Appleton district in Wisconsin.

“We’ve seen the organizations that survive disruption and reinvent themselves, they start with an independent team building from a fresh slate, as opposed to a team that’s trying to build on a bunch of work they’re already doing,” Arnett said.

The institute’s survey found 69 percent of administrators say their schools currently offer their own full-time virtual programs, compared with only 27 percent prior to COVID-19. Teachers are rapidly gaining new experience as well: 83 percent surveyed said they regularly teach online now, while only 16 percent said they regularly taught online before the pandemic.

Arnett, like many education observers, believes schools will return to full-time in-person instruction for most students when it’s safe to do so. But refining online instruction and offering it as an option going forward presents an opportunity to reach students who weren’t served well by the K-12 system even pre-pandemic, he said.

“For some students, the conventional classroom works a lot better. For some, they’re seeing some real benefits to online learning. Some online learning models are better than others,” Arnett said. “For me, the takeaway from all that is not to force people into models.”
What have you adjusted your teaching to a digital environment?

“Every day, we start with a morning meeting” to encourage social and emotional learning, Margaroli said. But she acknowledges that the morning meetings are “a little difficult through a screen. It is a lot of clicking. It’s on an iPad. There’s a lot of [tech access] issues.” And she wonders whether parents are giving their children a hand. “If parents are helping, is that work authentic?” Only about half of her students complete the assignments she gives them outside of class, so she doesn’t rely on those assignments to inform her lesson planning.

What is it like working with English-language learners in a digital environment?

Margaroli said her English-language learners are more frustrated than usual. “There’s this feeling of being rushed and that when you’re rushed you tend to speak quickly,” and may not get all the words or sounds correct, Margaroli said. That can lead to hurt feelings. “It’s hard when you are virtual, and I see a child upset with their microphone off. They have to choose to ask me for help.” She has reminded children that they need to let her know if they are struggling, telling her students: “I do not expect perfection.”

What’s your biggest worry about kids learning to read in remote learning environments?

“I’m a young teacher so you’d think I’d be more into tech,” Margaroli said. But she wants her students to have experience with tangible books. “I still deeply believe that children need books in their hands every day, multiple times a day, and that has been a gap or deficiency” of online learning.

What has been the impact of online teaching on grouping?

“In person, I have the flexibility to change my leveled groups on a whim whenever I want,” said Margaroli. She’d move a student if they gained a particular skill or seemed not to be grasping a concept. But now, it’s harder to make those shifts. “Every time I change groups virtually that means sending out a new schedule and a link,” she explained.

So, she said, “I’m becoming a bigger risk-taker with the groups.” If Margaroli feels students
Do you feel like your students are mastering the material?

“I think the reading foundational skills” are developing nicely, said Margaroli, whose students returned to school in mid-August of 2020. The majority of my kids knew very, very few letter sounds [at the beginning of the year] and are almost at 100 percent at letter sounds [now]. Phonics. Decoding. Spelling. I feel like my kids are learning at the exact same pace we would in a classroom.”

But she’s less sure about writing. “I have found it hard with my [computer] camera to model a writing piece... It’s not an authentic writing experience. I can’t see what they are writing unless they hold it up themselves.”

Has there been anything positive about teaching during COVID-19?

“I have really loved the online resources with phonics.”

Any other advice for teachers who are struggling with teaching reading during COVID-19?

“I feel like it’s so important for teachers, even if you are only having five kids log on, to not become complacent. Just like in the classroom where we say every kid can learn, we need to remember that every single child can learn virtually, too.”

Compared to prior to the pandemic, how frequently have you, or the teachers you work with, been using digital/online reading programs to teach students to read?

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<td>Much more frequently</td>
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Compared to teaching students to read in person with print materials, teaching students to read with remote instruction and digital materials is:

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<tr>
<td>About the same level of challenge</td>
<td>8%</td>
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<td>Somewhat more challenging</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Much more challenging</td>
<td>59%</td>
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*Results show responses from teachers, principals and district leaders who reported involvement with early reading instruction.

SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center
intermediate e-book content provides students with authentic and functional culture in action

OPINION

Published on September 8, 2017

E-books: Essential for Teaching Culture in Foreign Language Classrooms

By Kaitlin E. Thomas

Why E-Books

Tackling culture in an adequate and meaningful way is perhaps the most difficult domain to fulfill in a foreign language classroom, particularly for those who are far removed from locales that could provide an immersive outlet. Having long taught in precisely these types of settings, it has been a personal challenge at the start of each new semester to up the ante on how much relevant and worthwhile culture I am able to include for my students, and how I go about doing so.

As a self-admitted hoarder of any and all cultural materials that cross my path, I constantly collect snippets in anticipation of incorporating them as part of some lesson plan. A frequent obstacle has been the process of weaving each tidbit into cohesive activities. It often diverges into building a barrage of standalone cultural morsels accessible through a collection of websites, discussion board postings, or emails shared with students. While cultural materials would be studied and discussed, an ability to do all of this in a unified, collaborative, and portable fashion was lacking.

This became an impediment to achieving the level of cultural depth that I aspired to in my classes. I refused to accept that this was the only viable avenue for students to interact with contemporary cultural content. I have discovered that today educators of foreign languages do indeed have access to a truly exhaustive set of options for tools that simulate cultural and linguistic authenticity in remarkably cohesive and accessible capacities.

That is not to say it isn’t overwhelming to embark on sifting through all that is available. YouTube? Blogs? Podcasts? Online periodicals? The rate of production for innovative instructional ideas is dizzying, and commonly results in a decision to walk away before the surface has even been scratched. I’ve realized that for teachers and students alike there is immense value in tapping into one particular area: e-books. No longer simply electronic copies of traditional textbooks, there now exists the capacity for e-books to facilitate interactive content that has simply not previously existed. Innovative publishers are revolutionizing what teachers are able to do for and with their students by popularizing catalogs of scholarly e-books designed for real-time, hands-on linguistic and cultural learning in and outside of the classroom.

Features of High-Quality E-Books

By experimenting with different e-book tools and strategies, a few features stand out as superior. The ability to gamify dense grammar material has been invaluable, as have research task based activities like WebQuests. In one of my courses, a series of quests included such virtual scenarios as solving a mystery, investigating a crime, co-starring in a telenovela, planning a surprise party, and a scavenger hunt. Even the capability for students to personalize their own avatar ensures a more personal connection with the tasks being assigned.

Podcasts

In a different course, the students’ capability to listen, read, and develop their own content all in one convenient digital e-book setting facilitated the creation of our own interactive podcast series using a combination of Audacity and Timeline. Inspiration for episode styles and formatting came from podcast episodes such as Radio Ambulante, Notes in Spanish, and News in Slow that were embedded directly into the e-book we were using as a supplemental tool.

One example of an e-book featuring thematic podcast episodes is Español avanzado: escuchar para hablar. Students are able to simultaneously listen to the podcast while following along with a full Spanish or English transcript at their disposal. Rather than approach the study of a country from a sterile and distant stance, students are aurally immersed into emotive content that adds character and personality to each locale thus fostering a more intimate understanding, connection, and curiosity. Students delve into contemporary topics of the Spanish-speaking world that simply would not be possible if they are isolated at a far-removed school location or relying on traditional one-dimensional materials.

Maps, Blogs and Periodicals

Other features that have reformed the way my students interact with cultural information include, collaborative maps which embed informative and up-to-date oral and visual blurbs from travel, political, and contemporary periodicals and blogs for students to hover over and explore.

Videos

In the book, Español intermedio: con ganas de viajar, short videos from a variety of sources such as MadriDistinto, Mitú, BuzzFeed Spanish, and Pero Like are fixed directly into the e-text to
allow a student to watch, learn, reflect, and respond all in one place about topics that traditional textbooks do not have space for and traditional curricula tend to omit. The video content is not stilted or cheesy, another common impediment to student engagement with conventional materials.

**Interactive Timelines**

Immersive timelines can facilitate a virtual plunge into a topic, transforming it into a bona fide fully audiovisual experiential tour of history, a location, a person, or even a process (such as cooking a traditional recipe). Creating deeply engaging timelines isn’t the only possibility for innovative educators to recast how content is presented. Inline audio such as Soundcite, visual comparisons like Juxtapose, and narrative maps similar to StoryMap all offer a depth of instructional potential for educators to explore.

**Other Sources of E-Books**

If students are interested in delving into a combination of the virtual and traditional, direct them to Amazon’s Tienda Kindle or Project Gutenberg where after having developed a strong proficiency in the language and a more profound understanding of culture they can delve into literary e-books (contemporary and classic alike). While perhaps not as visually engaging, they do offer the challenge of pure audio comprehension which can be an exciting milestone to reach in one’s foreign language acquisition.

One-dimensionality and disconnection often result when only superficial tokens are used in activities and discussions. How often is Spain boiled down to just bullfighting and flamenco, Mexico to only sombreros and tequila, or Cuba to simply cigars and Che? No more mere tacos, tequila, and mariachi for my students, and no more for yours. Consider how leveraging interactive e-book content for foreign language instructors finally helps to connect the dots in our attempts to provide students with authentic and functional culture in action.

*Quote image created on Pablo.*

*Map image courtesy of the author.*

Kaitlin E. Thomas, a Lecturer of Spanish at Norwich University and Instructor of Spanish for the Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth, shares how e-books can be utilized for teaching culture in foreign language classes.

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**OPINION**

*Published March 23, 2021*

**The Coming Literacy Crisis: There’s No Going Back to School as We Knew It**

By Comer Yates, Renée Boynton-Jarrett & Maryanne Wolf

As we make strides in halting COVID-19’s lethal course, every parent is forced to consider, “Will my child be safe when they return to school without the repeated interruptions the virus imposed in the past year?”

We already know the answer. Too many schools haven’t been safe for children or their teachers since long before the current pandemic erected further barriers to children’s learning. Therefore, it cannot be an option to return to the same education system that has failed to meet the needs, hopes, and potential of the children most harmed by systemic inequities and racism.

As Frederick Douglass is widely quoted as saying: “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.” A century and a half later, the converse is equally true for too many children who never attain a level of literacy that allows them to reach their full potential. Only 35 percent of America’s 4th graders read proficiently, and access to educational opportunity and literacy in the United States remains overwhelmingly defined by ZIP code, race, socioeconomics, and ethnicity. As has been well chronicled, children’s reading levels at 3rd grade form one of the most meaningful academic benchmarks by which we can predict, while not perfectly, whether they will lead a life of self-determination or one that is too often decided for them—as measured by graduation rates and the opportunity to earn a livable wage.

In failing to set so many students up for future success, we have not only cheated our children, but we have failed our teachers. K-12 teachers experience daily stress that is among the highest of the 14 professions included in one Gallup study (measured before the pandemic)—equal only to nurses and physicians—of 78 percent of teachers reporting mental and physical exhaustion at the end of each day. It’s no wonder. They have been fighting a constant battle to help their students thrive in a system set up to fail them, generation after generation. Teaching remotely for many months has not lightened those stress loads nor revised the necessary objectives ahead.

Here’s an urgent two-point plan to fix what’s been fundamentally broken for generations as we think about what classrooms
should look like in the 2021-22 school year ahead and beyond:

First, we must change our universal assumptions around how young children learn. Advances in brain science make it clear that we must teach every child “to listen” rather than demand they “be quiet.” Interactive “serve and return” language engagement can foster relationships with adults that make space for vulnerability, support, agency, and healing. These relationships also help children build not only psychological strength but actual brain capacity to learn through the forming of social-emotional neural pathways. These pathways carry students from preliteracy language development, through to explicit reading instruction, to deep reading, and ultimately to the will and ability to make the greatest difference in the lives of others.

Second, we must equip our teachers with the tools necessary to be part of the fight against this cycle of injustice. Elementary and pre-K educators need the social-emotional skills and the necessary training in the science-backed explicit instruction every child needs through 3rd grade to read deeply. Reading deeply allows children to think beyond preconceived ideas and ultimately to act with the freedom to chart their own course. Structural inequities like underfunding education by ZIP code and institutional racism also deconstruct the freedoms children need through 3rd grade to read deeply. Read science-backed explicit instruction every child needs through 3rd grade to read deeply. Reading deeply allows children to think beyond preconceived ideas and ultimately to act with the freedom to chart their own course.

It took us less than a year to develop and begin administering a vaccine for COVID-19, but research scientists determined 20 years ago what was required to end our country’s illiteracy epidemic. The unspeakable toll we inflict on children through systemic biases and behaviors amounts to denial of access to that science for those who need it most. Where is the urgency to act—on policies and empirically derived practices—on the science of reading?

Healthy child development quickly crumbles without connections built through language in safe emotional spaces. Building the capacity to engage with the words, thoughts, and feelings of others is a neurological non-negotiable. The fully tested science demonstrates that these connections are crucial—from the last trimester of pregnancy through age 8 and beyond—for construction of the “deep reading” brain. The solution requires early social-emotional engagement, language input and exchange, and development of children’s executive functions like self-regulation in the first five years. In the following five years of every child’s life, we need teachers who understand both the science and the poetry of teaching children to read and think with all their intelligence.

All this amounts to a literacy treatment that we, in the United States, have dispensed to make the rich richer and the poor poorer, rather than demand they “be quiet.” Interactive “serve and return” language engagement can foster relationships with adults that make space for vulnerability, support, agency, and healing. These relationships also help children build not only psychological strength but actual brain capacity to learn through the forming of social-emotional neural pathways. These pathways carry students from preliteracy language development, through to explicit reading instruction, to deep reading, and ultimately to the will and ability to make the greatest difference in the lives of others.

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Second, we must equip our teachers with the tools necessary to be part of the fight against this cycle of injustice. Elementary and pre-K educators need the social-emotional skills and the necessary training in the science-backed explicit instruction every child needs through 3rd grade to read deeply. Reading deeply allows children to think beyond preconceived ideas and ultimately to act with the freedom to chart their own course. Structural inequities like underfunding education by ZIP code and institutional racism also demand action, but well-trained teachers themselves have a huge role to play in a just future.

All this amounts to a literacy treatment that we, in the United States, have dispensed to make the rich richer and the poor poorer, instead of distributing it universally. For no population has this inequity and silencing been more devastating than for generations of Black children. At a time when it was illegal to teach enslaved children to read, families risked everything to teach their children in “pit schools” in the middle of the night, drawing letters in the dirt in total silence to avoid bounty hunters, in a perilous effort to attain the freedom of which Frederick Douglass spoke.

Centuries in the making, the silence that was born in slavery remains cruelly imposed upon parents and teachers to shield their children from the mortal dangers of perceived noncompliance or using one’s voice too soon or too powerfully. The truth is that none of our children will be safe and free—not next fall, not ever—until we make and keep Douglass’ promise for all our children.

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