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# Reading Intervention

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Reading is a fundamental skill that underpins all subjects and enables critical thinking and communication. This Spotlight will help you gain insights into how to help students transfer background knowledge to new texts; examine the benefits of teaching reading and writing concurrently; analyze key takeaways on the decline of student reading scores; explore how a greater focus on content could improve reading instruction; and more.

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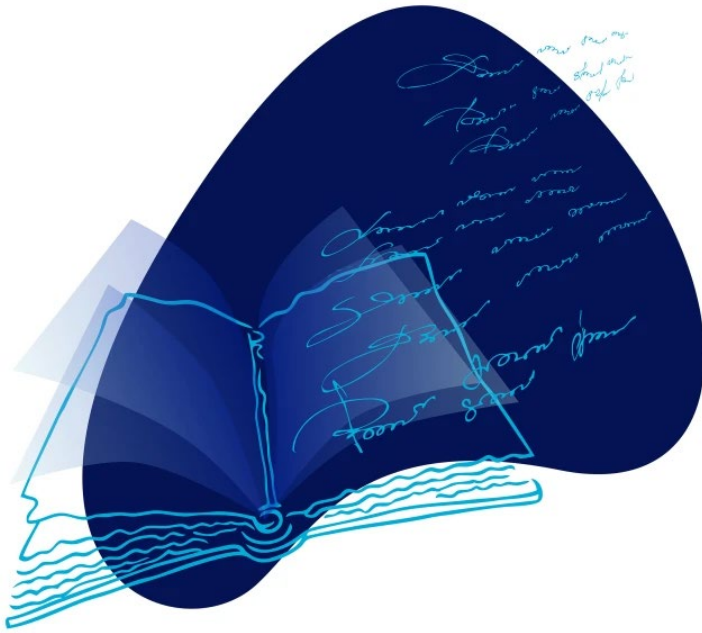
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## Teachers Are Told to ‘Activate Prior Knowledge.’ Here’s How That Works In Reading

By Sarah Schwartz

**W**hen students are reading something new, teachers often try to get them to draw on their prior knowledge to help them understand the text in front of them.

Doing this can help kids make sense of ideas that are unfamiliar. But it can also be a hard skill to master.

A new study suggests an approach that can help. The research, published in the *Journal of Education Psychology* earlier this month, finds that teaching elementary students about conceptually related topics—and explicitly showing them how to make connections between vocabulary words and ideas—can help them apply their knowledge in new contexts.

The finding has implications for a critical part of reading instruction: comprehension.

Over the past few years, some education advocates have promoted reading curricula that aim to develop students’ content area knowledge in social studies and science.

These programs are motivated by the large evidence base showing that background knowl-

edge is an important component in reading instruction. The more children know about a topic, the better they can understand a book or article about it: If students are taught a lot about the American Revolution, they’ll understand texts about the American Revolution better.

But it’s less clear whether knowledge-building programs can have a broader effect. To extend the example above, will they be able to apply that knowledge to understand other political movements? Will it improve their reading comprehension in social studies topics as a whole?

“The million dollar question in education is, ‘How far can all of our interventions travel?’” said James Kim, a professor of education at Harvard University and the lead author on this new study.

Kim and his colleagues set out to investigate that question.

### Creating a ‘unifying intellectual structure’

The study included 30 elementary schools in one urban school district in the southeastern United States. These schools used a mix of different reading methods in 1st and 2nd grades.

Researchers randomly assigned the schools to either treatment or control groups. In the control group, teachers conducted their usual science or social studies instruction.

Treatment group teachers delivered thematically related literacy lessons about how scientists study past events. These students also read books on related topics during the summer between 1st and 2nd grades.

The lessons that the treatment group teachers used across both grades were all building toward the same theme: how scientists study past events.

First graders learned about how animals survive in their habitats, 2nd graders about how paleontologists studied prehistoric animals and events. The goal was to help students in the treatment group build a set of interrelated knowledge, called a schema.

A schema is a sort of mental framework—what Kim called a “unifying intellectual structure.” It helps readers keep facts and ideas related to the same concept in one place in their mind. That way, they can retrieve and apply them when they need to use this knowledge to understand something new. And they can add related things they learn into the schema, building it out to be more complex, robust, and interconnected.

To do this, teachers in the treatment group did topically-connected read-alouds, had students read text, and explicitly taught vocabulary like “survival,” “adaptation,” and “extinction.” They also had students apply their knowledge, using these words and concepts to write and discuss, and participate in collaborative research projects.

Students in the control group were learning similar content to students in the treatment group. But these control group students didn’t get the same support aimed at helping them build a schema.

### Measuring transfer

On a science content test, the students who received the intervention outperformed their peers, suggesting that this focus on building interconnected conceptual understandings made a difference.

They also did better than control group students on general reading comprehension tests, and by the fall of 2nd grade, students in the treatment group showed less summer learning loss than students in the control group.

These are the two kinds of outcomes that knowledge-building interventions usually test, said Kim: whether students learn the content they’re being taught, and whether it

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moves the needle on reading comprehension more generally. But he and his colleagues also went one step further.

They wanted to see exactly how far students could transfer the knowledge that they learned, using the mental models that they had created. Would they be able to draw connections to new topics on their own?

The researchers gave students three separate passages to read. All three were conceptually related to what students had learned about paleontologists studying dinosaurs, but the texts varied in how explicitly they drew those connections.

The first was very similar to what the students had learned in both the treatment and control groups. It also focused on paleontologists, but it introduced a new species that students' hadn't learned about—ammonites, an extinct type of shellfish.

The second passage was about archeologists studying the ruins of Pompeii. It used some of the same vocabulary and concepts, and it drew a few explicit connections to paleontology—for example, saying the event was “like a mass extinction” and describing the remains as “fossilized humans.”

The last passage, about genealogists mapping people's descendants, had the fewest explicit supports. It was still conceptually related—about how scientists study past events—but the passage didn't include any of the language students had learned.

Students who had been through the intervention did better on comprehension assessments of the first and second passages than their peers in the control group. But there wasn't a difference for the third passage.

Using assessments like these presents a more fine-grained picture of what students actually know than general comprehension tests, Kim said.

The paper's recommendation, that policymakers introduce these kinds of content-aligned reading assessments, would pose steep challenges in most states, where English/language arts standards are content-agnostic and districts vary in the topics they cover. Only one state, Louisiana, has experimented with such a test.

But gauging transfer can be useful for individual educators in a more informal setting, too, Kim said.

“If you know how far kids are transferring knowledge, it's a signal to teachers of what they need to go back and discuss,” he said. ■

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## How Does Writing Fit Into the ‘Science of Reading’?

By Stephen Sawchuk

**I**n one sense, the national conversation about what it will take to make sure all children become strong readers has been wildly successful: States are passing legislation supporting evidence-based teaching approaches, and school districts are rushing to supply training. Publishers are under pressure to drop older materials. And for the first time in years, an instructional issue—reading—is headlining education media coverage.

In the middle of all that, though, the focus on the “science of reading” has elided its twin component in literacy instruction: writing.

Writing is intrinsically important for all students to learn—after all, it is the primary way beyond speech that humans communicate. But more than that, research suggests that teaching students to write in an integrated fashion with reading is not only efficient, it’s effective.

Yet writing is often underplayed in the elementary grades. Too often, it is separated from schools’ reading block. Writing is not assessed as frequently as reading, and principals, worried about reading-exam scores, direct teachers to focus on one often at the expense of the other. Finally, beyond the English/language arts block, kids often aren’t asked to do much writing in early grades.

“Sometimes, in an early-literacy classroom, you’ll hear a teacher say, ‘It’s time to pick up your pencils,’” said Wiley Blevins, an author and literacy consultant who provides training in schools. “But your pencils should be in your hand almost the entire morning.”

Strikingly, many of the critiques that reading researchers have made against the “balanced literacy” approach that has held sway in schools for decades could equally apply to writing instruction: Foundational writing skills—like phonics and language structure—have not generally been taught systematically or explicitly.

And like the “find the main idea” strategies commonly taught in reading comprehension, writing instruction has tended to focus on content-neutral tasks, rather than deepening students’ connections to the content they learn.

Education Week wants to bring more attention to these connections in the stories that make up this special collection. But first, we want to delve deeper into the case for including writing in every step of the elementary curriculum.



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“  
There’s no question that reading and writing share a lot of real estate, they depend on a lot of the same knowledge and skills.”

**TIMOTHY SHANAHAN**

Professor of Education,  
University of Illinois Chicago

### Why has writing been missing from the reading conversation?

Much like the body of knowledge on how children learn to read words, it is also settled science that reading and writing draw on shared knowledge, even though they have traditionally been segmented in instruction.

“The body of research is substantial in both number of studies and quality of studies. There’s no question that reading and writing share a lot of real estate, they depend on a lot of the same knowledge and skills,” said Timothy Shanahan, an emeritus professor of education

at the University of Illinois Chicago. “Pick your spot: text structure, vocabulary, sound-symbol relationships, ‘world knowledge.’”

The reasons for the bifurcation in reading and writing are legion. One is that the two fields have typically been studied separately. (Researchers studying writing usually didn’t examine whether a writing intervention, for instance, also aided students’ reading abilities—and vice versa.)

Some scholars also finger the dominance of the federally commissioned National Reading Panel report, which in 2000 outlined key instructional components of learning to read. The review didn’t examine the connection of writing to reading.

Looking even further back yields insights, too. Penmanship and spelling were historically the only parts of writing that were taught, and when writing reappeared in the latter half of the 20th century, it tended to focus on “process writing,” emphasizing personal experience and story generation over other genres. Only when the Common Core State Standards appeared in 2010 did the emphasis shift to writing about nonfiction texts and across subjects—the idea that students should be writing about what they’ve learned.

And finally, teaching writing is hard. Few studies document what preparation teachers receive to teach writing, but in surveys, many teachers say they received little training in their college education courses. That’s probably why only a little over half of teachers, in one 2016 survey, said that they enjoyed teaching writing.

### Writing should begin in the early grades

These factors all work against what is probably the most important conclusion from the research over the last few decades: Students in the early-elementary grades need lots of varied opportunities to write.

“Students need support in their writing,” said Dana Robertson, an associate professor of reading and literacy education at the school of education at Virginia Tech who also studies how instructional change takes root in schools. “They need to be taught explicitly the skills and strategies of writing and they need to see the connections of reading, writing, and knowledge development.”

While research supports some fundamental tenets of writing instruction—that it should be structured, for instance, and involve drafting and revising—it hasn't yet pointed to a specific teaching recipe that works best.

One of the challenges, the researchers note, is that while reading curricula have improved over the years, they still don't typically provide many supports for students—or teachers, for that matter—for writing. Teachers often have to supplement with additions that don't always mesh well with their core, grade-level content instruction.

“We have a lot of activities in writing we know are good,” Shanahan said. “We don't really have a yearlong elementary-school-level curriculum in writing. That just doesn't exist the way it does in reading.”

Nevertheless, practitioners like Blevins work writing into every reading lesson, even in the earliest grades. And all the components that make up a solid reading program can be enhanced through writing activities.

If students are doing work on phonemic awareness—the ability to recognize sounds—they shouldn't merely manipulate sounds orally; they can put them on the page using letters. If students are learning how to decode, they can also encode—record written letters and words while they say the sounds out loud.

And students can write as they begin learning about language structure. When Blevins' students are mainly working with decodable texts with controlled vocabularies, writing can support their knowledge about how texts and narratives work: how sentences are put together and how they can be pulled apart and reconstructed. Teachers can prompt them in these tasks, asking them to rephrase a sentence as a question, split up two sentences, or combine them.

“Young kids are writing these mile-long sentences that become second nature. We set a higher bar, and they are fully capable of doing it. We can demystify a bit some of that complex text if we develop early on how to talk about sentences—how they're created, how they're joined,” Blevins said. “There are all these things you can do that are helpful to develop an understanding of how sentences work and to get lots of practice.”

As students progress through the elementary grades, this structured work grows more sophisticated. They need to be taught both sentence and paragraph structure, and they need to learn how different writing purposes and genres—narrative, persuasive, analytical—demand different approaches. Most of

all, the research indicates, students need opportunities to write at length often.

### Using writing to support students' exploration of content

Reading is far more than foundational skills, of course. It means introducing students to rich content and the specialized vocabulary in each discipline and then ensuring that they read, discuss, analyze, and write about those ideas. The work to systematically build students' knowledge begins in the early grades and progresses throughout their K-12 experience.

Here again, available evidence suggests that writing can be a useful tool to help students explore, deepen, and draw connections in this content. With the proper supports, writing can be a method for students to retell and analyze what they've learned in discussions of content and literature throughout the school day—in addition to their creative writing.

This “writing to learn” approach need not wait for students to master foundational skills. In the K-2 grades especially, much content is learned through teacher read-alouds and conversation that include more complex vocabulary and ideas than the texts students are capable of reading. But that should not preclude students from writing about this content, experts say.

“We do a read-aloud or a media piece and we write about what we learned. It's just a part of how you're responding, or sharing, what you've learned across texts; it's not a separate thing from reading,” Blevins said. “If I am doing read-alouds on a concept—on animal habitats, for example—my decodable texts will be on animals. And students are able to include some of these more sophisticated ideas and language in their writing, because we've elevated the conversations around these texts.”

In this set of stories, Education Week examines the connections between elementary-level reading and writing in three areas—encoding, language and text structure, and content-area learning. But there are so many more examples.

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## EdWeek Update

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## 5 Things to Know About the Slide In Reading Achievement on NAEP

By Sarah D. Sparks

**S**tudents' reading achievement in both 4th and 8th grades fell three points during the pandemic, according to the tests known as the Nation's Report Card.

The decline put the nation's students roughly on par with students' reading achievement in the first state-level National Assessment of Educational Progress in 1992.

The main NAEP, administered by the National Center for Education Statistics, takes a snapshot of national and state-level student achievement in reading and math every two years, but was delayed by the pandemic from 2021 to spring 2022. It provides a representative sample of reading performance based on more than 108,000 4th graders and more than 111,000 8th graders in every state.

"Reading is foundational to success in school and life," said Nardi Routten, a 4th grade teacher in New Bern, N.C., and a member of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees NAEP, in a statement. "Schools need to take evidence-based action, aligned with the science of reading, and work closely with teachers to ensure that elementary and middle school students become strong readers and can access more complex work as they progress through their education."

Here's what you need to know.

### 1. Reading results are grim, but not as bad as in math.

No state improved in reading in either grades 4 or 8, but 8th graders in the Los Angeles Unified school district and in the Department of Defense schools, which serve children of military families, made gains from 2019 to 2020. Maine had the sharpest reading decline in 8th grade, falling eight points, while Virginia's 4th graders fell 10 points since 2019, the largest reading decline of any state in that grade.

However, NCES Commissioner Peggy Carr pointed to urban school districts' reading scores as "bright spots, pockets of resilience, amidst all the chaos of the pandemic."

Most of the country's largest districts participating in NAEP's Trial Urban District Assessment held steady in reading at both grades during the pandemic. Only nine of the 26 TUDA districts declined in average reading scores in 4th grade, and only four declined in 8th grade.

Nationwide, Black, Hispanic, Native American, and white students all declined in reading in 4th grade in 2022 compared to 2019, though only white students also declined in 8th grade.

Moreover, students performed worse in reading in both grades, be they boys or girls, low-income or wealthier students across most of the country. Only 8th graders in the West

showed no significant change in reading achievement in 2022.

But reading performance was less troubling than math, with results showing historic lows in that subject at both grade levels.

### 2. Fewer than 1 in 3 students read proficiently at either grade.

NAEP measures reading comprehension of both literary texts, such as fiction and poetry, and informational texts, such as argumentation and procedural documents. Students at both grades are gauged on three "cognitive targets;" their ability to locate and remember information, interpret meaning, and critique and evaluate texts.

In 2022, 4th and 8th graders performed worse across the board than they had in 2019, correctly answering fewer questions in all three cognitive areas, working with both literary and informational texts. Only a third of 4th graders and 31 percent of 8th graders read at the proficient level in 2022, significantly fewer in both grades compared to before the pandemic.

Moreover, 37 percent of 4th graders and 30 percent of 8th graders performed below NAEP's lowest benchmark—the basic level—in 2022. That's the largest pool of struggling readers since 2003 in 4th grade and 1994 in 8th grade.

In practical terms, that means significantly more 4th grade students weren't able to make simple inferences about story characters or plot, or to identify a main idea that was explicitly stated in an informational text. Among 8th graders, more students in 2022 couldn't identify or provide support for their judgments about an author's intent in a fictional character's motivation, nor could they recognize inferences based on main ideas and supporting details in texts that made arguments.

"What we need to take away from this is that ... now what we're seeing is students at the bottom of the distribution dropping even faster [than before the pandemic], and we're also seeing students who were not showing declines—meaning students at the higher-performing levels, who were holding steady before the pandemic or even improving—now all the students regardless of their ability are dropping" in achievement, Carr said.

### 3. Reading teachers are more comfortable with virtual instruction, but not closing learning gaps.

Nearly all students returned to full-time in-person classes in 2021-22, but after two

years of off-and-on virtual schooling, teachers reported in a 2022 background survey given in tandem with NAEP that they have grown more confident in their ability to handle future disruptions.

More than 9 out of 10 students in 4th and 8th grades had teachers who were reasonably confident that they could “probably” or “definitely” teach a distance-learning lesson in real time and provide students with feedback virtually. Likewise, more than 80 percent of students in both grades had teachers who were at least moderately confident that they could create engaging distance-learning materials and help students who had trouble with the format.

By contrast, fewer than half of students in either grade had a teacher who was “quite” or “extremely” confident that they would be able to address the gaps in students’ reading skills, and teachers in both grades showed lower levels of work satisfaction compared to teachers in 2019.

#### 4. Intensive tutoring may not have gained as much ground as intended.

While many districts pledged to invest federal and state recovery funding in intensive tutoring—including 1-to-1 or very small group instruction several times a week—the share of students actually receiving such supports has not yet increased.

U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona noted that 56 percent of schools reported—in a separate NCES study—using intensive, high-dosage tutoring to help students recover lost academic ground.

However, only 25 percent of 8th graders and 34 percent of 4th graders in 2022 reported they received tutoring in English/language arts at least once or twice a week. That’s actually two percentage points fewer 4th graders who received frequent reading tutoring than in 2019, and no difference in tutored 8th graders, compared to before the pandemic, NAEP’s background data show.

Likewise, 4th graders were no more likely in 2022 than in 2019 to have a literacy specialist or coach available to them or their teachers, though the share of full-time reading coaches rose compared to part-time coaches during the pandemic. However, 8th grade students were three percentage points more likely to have full- or part-time reading specialists at their schools in 2022, about 42 percent, than in 2019.

Patricia Levesque, the chief executive

officer of the Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcellinEd), recommended that states and districts dedicate more money to providing middle and high school literacy coaches to help teachers in upper grades cope with students with holes in their foundational reading skills.

“We talk about how kids will learn how to read from K-3 and then from 4th grade on they’re reading to learn, which means there isn’t a reading class anymore; there’s a lit class or there’s a language arts class, where the assumption is kids can read,” Levesque said.

“A lot of content-area teachers—the science teacher, the math teacher, the social studies teacher—in middle school grades or higher, are not aware of what are the techniques, what are the things that I can do in my content-area class in order to help struggling readers,” Levesque said. “That’s why middle school literacy coaches are going to be really important in order to give those teachers the tools that they need to help struggling readers.”

#### 5. Young students show some signs of bouncing back this fall, but there’s a long way to go.

Students took the reading NAEP last spring. At least one study taken this fall suggests students too young to participate in NAEP may be starting to rebound from the academic disruptions of the last few years.

The assessment group Amplify released data last week on the reading progress of more than 300,000 K-3 students in 43 states who took the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills, or DIBELS, a commonly used early reading assessment. It found 55 percent of 3rd graders—and only a third of kindergartners—are on track to read at grade level by the end of the 2022-23 school year.

While that’s lower than the share of students on track in reading in K-3 before the pandemic, there were more students on track this fall than in fall 2021 in every grade except 3rd.

“Maybe there’s some promise in that we’re seeing some benefit [in fall reading performance] in 2022-23 versus what we’d seen in 2021-22,” said Paul Gazzero, director of data analysis for Amplify and the author of that study, before the NAEP results were released. “So while NAEP, I would suspect, is going to rain down more bad news and fear ... one might argue that if we see the system starting to turn around, which we are, that maybe the next set of 9-year-olds that we look at two years later will start to look a little bit better.” ■



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# What Is Background Knowledge, and How Does It Fit Into the Science of Reading?

By Sarah Schwartz

**A**nyone who’s ever scratched their head over their car manual or struggled to parse a website’s terms of service knows: It’s hard to read about a topic you don’t really understand.

It’s a common-sense statement that’s backed by research. Studies have shown that readers use their background knowledge—vocabulary, facts, and conceptual understanding—to comprehend the text they read.

Much of this evidence isn’t new. But it’s received more attention now, amid the “science of reading” movement.

In recent years, a growing number of parents, teachers, and reading researchers have called for changes to early literacy instruction, to bring it more in line with the evidence base around how children learn to read. Often, schools weren’t taking research-based approaches to teaching students a crucial building block of reading—how to sound out words. If kids can’t get the words off the page, they can’t extract meaning from text.

Over the past three years, about two dozen states have passed laws mandating that students are taught these skills in an explicit, systematic way.

At the same time, though, some science of reading advocates have said that foundational skills instruction isn’t the only piece of literacy learning that needs an overhaul. They argue that schools also don’t do enough to support students’ background knowledge—a key factor in their understanding of any text. That’s the issue explored in *The Knowledge Gap*, a book that’s made its way onto district leaders’ reading lists and into teacher professional learning groups.

Over the past few decades, reading comprehension instruction has become “content agnostic,” focused on skill practice, to the detriment of learning about science, history, and other disciplines, said Sonia Cabell, an associate professor at Florida State University’s College of Education.

“In the No Child Left Behind era, and the Reading First era, reading became the main focus. Reading blocks were lengthened. This pushed out the science and social studies in-



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struction,” Cabell said, referring to the 2002 federal law and a \$1 billion-a-year reading program it created.

Cabell and other researchers who study the integration of content knowledge and literacy instruction say the focus on “knowledge building” holds promise. But they also say there are a lot of unanswered questions about how these approaches should be designed, and how much they can actually improve reading achievement.

Here’s what experts and research say about what a greater focus on content knowledge could mean for reading instruction.

## What role does background knowledge play in reading comprehension?

A big one. Decades of studies have shown that children can understand text better if they have some background knowledge about the topic.

This may seem like an obvious finding: Of course, kids can understand a book or an article better if they already know a bit of what it’s about. It’s likely easier to read a text about paleontologists, for example, if you already know the words “fossil” and “extinction,” and you know that animal species that used to exist have since died out.

This applies even for children who are otherwise poor readers. One example of this

is what’s often referred to as “the baseball study.”

In a 1988 paper, researchers Donna Recht and Lauren Leslie divided middle schoolers up into groups, based on two factors: their general reading ability, and their knowledge about baseball. Then they asked the kids to read a passage about a game.

They found that the baseball lovers who scored low on a general reading test could understand and recall the text better than the higher-scoring kids who didn’t know as much about the game.

So, background knowledge about a specific topic is helpful in understanding text on that topic. But what about in general? Does knowing more about the world lead to better reading comprehension overall?

A large body of research shows a correlation: Children who score higher on tests of general knowledge are better readers. These kids also tend to grow more than their peers in reading comprehension over time, said Gina Cervetti, an associate professor at the University of Michigan’s School of Education, who studies the connections between literacy and content-area learning.

But other factors could play a role, too.

“Those kinds of correlations are tricky, because there are a lot of other things that are going on,” said Timothy Shanahan, an emeritus professor of education at the University of Illinois Chicago. People who score higher on

tests of general knowledge also tend to have greater language ability, and tend to be from higher-income backgrounds.

### If background knowledge is linked to reading ability, does teaching knowledge help kids become better readers?

It can. But there are some caveats.

There are a few different ways that teachers can connect content knowledge and literacy instruction in the elementary school day. One option is to merge the two—to embed literacy instruction into social studies and science, teaching students cognitive strategies to help them engage with the content.

This has positive results. In a 2022 meta-analysis, researchers Hyejin Hwang, Sonia Cabell, and Rachel Joyner examined studies that took this integrated approach to literacy and content-area instruction. Kids who were taught this way retained more vocabulary and understood content better than children who learned science or social studies separately from reading instruction.

These students also did better on standardized tests of reading comprehension. The integrated approach not only made them better readers of the content they were learning, it made them better readers overall.

Another approach is to build it into reading classes, developing English/language arts units that are structured to deepen students' understanding about different topics. This is often the approach advocates are referencing when they promote high-quality or "content-rich" curriculum.

This method has shown more mixed results.

Most studies of this approach find that it has a positive effect on students' knowledge of the subject in question—for example, teaching a 4th grader about the American Revolution will likely mean that they know more about the American Revolution. But only some of these approaches lead to higher scores on tests of general reading comprehension.

One that does is the Model of Reading Engagement, or MORE. It was developed by Harvard education professor James Kim and his colleagues.

The approach aims to build students' science content knowledge through literacy lessons. But it's not just focused on acquiring facts. The researchers designed the lessons with the goal of helping kids to build a schema—a mental model that they could then apply to understand new, related concepts.

The overarching theme of the program,

“

In the No Child Left Behind era, and the Reading First era, reading became the main focus. Reading blocks were lengthened. This pushed out the science and social studies instruction.”

#### SONIA CABELL

Associate Professor,  
Florida State University's College  
of Education

in this case, was how scientists study past events. Throughout 1st and 2nd grade, students learned about interrelated concepts that would build that schema. Units centered on how animals survive in their habitats, and how paleontologists study prehistoric animals and events. A 2023 study from Kim and his colleagues found that the approach helped students apply the science vocabulary and concepts they learned to other contexts.

Kim's study, and others that have shown general effects on reading comprehension, hold something in common, said Cervetti.

“These programs weren't teaching kids a bunch of knowledge at a superficial level. It wasn't knowledge as a set of facts to be learned,” she said. “These kids were learning deeply about a set of concepts.”

Still, in Kim's study, there was a limit to how far kids could transfer the knowledge that they learned. Generally, the new texts had to include explicit connections to the words and concepts they'd learned. If the familiar concepts were missing, students couldn't make the connections themselves.

If kids can't make connections between related topics, “it's a signal to teachers of what they need to go back and discuss,” Kim said.

### How should schools decide what kids should read and write about? What knowledge should be the focus?

This question has dogged the American education system for decades—if not centuries.

It's the debate at the heart of many decisions about teaching and learning. The conversation is particularly volatile now, as parents' groups and Republican legislators seek to limit what students can read and discuss in the classroom.

Studies' insight on this topic is limited. Evidence would suggest that students' curiosity should play a role, Cervetti said. There's a large body of work demonstrating that student interest and motivation have a strong impact on academic achievement.

But outside of that, things are more fuzzy. What's the right balance of depth versus breadth in topics? What knowledge will best prepare students for their lives outside of school? Researchers don't know.

Still, some education scholars have offered prescriptions. Perhaps the most well-known—and certainly one of the most debated—of these roadmaps was developed by E. D. Hirsch Jr., a professor emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia and the modern father of the knowledge-building movement.

Hirsch popularized the idea that students needed to learn about something in order to read well. In his 1987 book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, Hirsch outlined a list of essential figures, events, and concepts. He tried to identify the background knowledge that would comprise a sort of cultural canon—the information that most writers and speakers would assume their audience shared.

Its contents provided the framework for Core Knowledge Language Arts, an ELA curriculum. But Hirsch's work also saw a swift and strong backlash from critics who said his list was Eurocentric and elitist.

Hirsch has argued that the approach he advocates is a way of providing equal opportunity, putting children on an even playing field with a shared reserve of knowledge—regardless of their cultural, racial, or socioeconomic backgrounds.

Still, the question of whose knowledge matters—what's important for children to know and who gets to decide—is far from settled.

Some more recent efforts have used Hirsch as inspiration. The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy has created Knowledge

Maps, tools it uses in work with districts looking to evaluate how and where their curricula build knowledge.

The Knowledge Maps are based on Hirsch's core knowledge guidelines with some additions and changes—such as added criteria around diversity, equity, and inclusion, said Ashley Berner, the director of the institute.

Other programs have taken different approaches. In the MORE intervention, Kim and his co-authors tried to choose content that was “timely and timeless.” Timely, in that it aligned to current state standards in science. And timeless: It has shown up consistently in state standards over the past two decades, and science professors think that it's relevant and accurate.

Of course, these are still subjective decisions—an inevitability in choosing knowledge, said Shanahan. “When it comes to certain aspects of the arts, and science, and social studies, what content do we want kids to know? Those are value judgments,” he said.

### Is knowledge the only factor in reading comprehension ability?

Far from it. Children don't just need to learn information. They also need to know how to organize it in their minds, use it, and apply it in new contexts.

Teaching comprehension strategies can help students become skilled at these tasks. Decades of research have shown that explicitly teaching students how to use these strategies—like summarizing, visualizing, creating graphic organizers, and asking questions about their understanding—makes them better readers.

Teaching students about how different types of text are structured has also been shown to improve reading comprehension.

“This is a clear case in our field of a ‘both-and,’ not an ‘either or,’ said Nell Duke, the executive director of the Center for Early Literacy Success at Stand for Children.

In fact, most of the knowledge-building interventions that show positive effects in the research literature have combined content-area instruction with these kinds of strategies for metacognition, said Cervetti.

Cervetti thinks it's likely that deep content area knowledge and students' ability to use comprehension strategies reinforce each other.

“Imagine being a kid who has read lots of texts, but every text you encounter is unfamiliar ideas and unfamiliar words,” she said.

“You get through the text and you walk away having understood something about that text. But probably not enough to be a better comprehender.”

With these topically disconnected texts, the student doesn't have the chance to practice the strategies that good readers use, Cervetti said, like making connections or asking questions prompted by prior knowledge. But if the texts work together to build a bigger conceptual understanding, they do present those opportunities. Knowledge, she hypothesized, “builds momentum” for kids to practice the comprehension strategies that research shows are powerful tools.

There's also some evidence that knowledge-rich contexts naturally facilitate richer conversations. A 2013 study by Cabell and her colleagues found that preschool teachers used more sophisticated language structures when they integrated reading and science instruction.

### What do all of these findings mean for classroom practice?

The main takeaway is that reading instruction should be engaging students in deep, substantive ideas, said Cervetti.

Yes, learning about something—having clearly defined topics—is important. But these topics need to help students build a broader, conceptual understanding.

That means that instead of learning about “oceans”—an umbrella that could encompass everything from reading news articles about microplastics to studying *Moby Dick*—a unit might be centered around a theme, such as, “we have one connected water system.”

Some English/language arts curricula attempt to structure units this way, developing them around social studies and science ideas. But Duke cautioned that these ELA programs shouldn't be seen as a substitute for instruction in other subject areas.

Science and social studies don't just teach content; they also teach discipline-specific practices—like developing a hypothesis or analyzing a primary source. “That kind of information, in my perception, doesn't tend to make it into ELA curricula,” she said.

“I think an increasing segment of the field is picking up on the idea that content-rich English/language arts instruction is better for kids,” Duke added. “But it has not fully tackled the question of, when in our day is there space left for science and social studies? And [there's] little attention to, how do we coordinate that across the school day?” ■



# The Science of Writing: Actionable Practices for Overall Literacy Development

An interview with literacy expert **Dr. Leslie Laud**,  
Bank Street College of Education.



**R**eading and writing are reciprocal processes that build and support each other. When writing is leveraged as a tool to raise overall ELA and content mastery outcomes, research studies and schools show powerful gains.

Our interview with Dr. Leslie Laud, a respected writing expert, explores the latest research about the importance of writing as a component to teaching reading, why writing needs to be at the center of classroom instruction, and the role writing can play in evidence-based practices for raising literacy outcomes.

**Q: Tell us about the reading-writing connection and why all reading instruction must include writing?**

**A:** Currently, there is a disconnect between reading and writing instruction and they are frequently taught separately. Reading often

dominates literacy instruction, with writing sidelined. Yet, reading and writing are complementary processes that can work to build one another. Students who consistently practice writing responses to texts learn to engage closely with sources, pulling out strong vocabulary, unpacking rich sentence structures, learning key concepts, and building knowledge. They then organize their responses into an outline, summarizing the content as they do while also engaging in deep analytical thinking about the material learned.

One of the most important skills we can teach our students in this hyper knowledge-based world is learning how to build one's own knowledge, find answers, and reason well about information. Leveraging reading and writing together to support these goals better builds this capacity in students.

**Q: Writing is often taught as a single skill. Why is this the wrong approach?**

**A:** As with reading, writing develops in multiple areas at once. Writing transcription (spelling, handwriting, grammar) and idea production develop together at the same time. For many young writers, their ideas and ability to express these may be several years beyond their capability to transcribe them. Just as how we would not hold a child back and focus only on decoding without also working to build listening comprehension at the same time, students need explicit instruction and deliberate practice in all the many strands that go into writing at the same time. While this can seem daunting, there are simple high-yield instructional practices that show quick gains in student writing outcomes and confidence right away.

**Q: What does the most recent research reveal about what works in explicit, Structured Literacy instruction and how can educators apply it in their classrooms?**

**A:** Students need explicit, structured instruction in the features of effective writing and in how to use writing strategies independently in self-regulated ways.

As an entry point, research has found teachers should begin instruction on the key features of writing by starting with the whole—looking at text structure. Teachers can introduce common text structures such as that paragraphs include TIDE: Topic, Information, Details, End. Students can then color code paragraphs for these core structural elements, then use this understanding of structure when they write their own pieces. Next, or even at the same time, teach lessons on the subcomponents of writing such as grammatical elements or how to link ideas. A well-structured curriculum or set of materials is critical to ensure students receive full instruction in all the elements needed to write effectively.

**Q: Can you tell us what evidence-based practices consist of, or should include?**

**A:** To ensure practices are evidence-based, always ask to see the specific research studies that support recommended practices. Is a practice shown to result in significant gains in overall writing in a published study that was: 1.) Peer-reviewed; 2.) independently funded; 3.) shown to result in meaningful sizes above .40?

When vetting materials or a curriculum, look to see if they include the most well-supported, evidence-based practices. Are they grounded in a Structured Literacy approach? Do they teach text structures such as how a

paragraph is set up from the start? Are the processes expert writers use introduced in a stepwise broken-down way? Does this instruction include extensive modeling and scaffolding? Are sub skills then taught in ways that include a focus on transfer to the writing students do as well? Are reading and writing taught together?

**Q: What are the essential skills all students must learn to become proficient writers?**

**A:** In a nutshell, students need to become self-regulating and goal driven. They must understand what is being asked of them, know and be able to use the skills and strategies experts use, have a clear vision of where they are going, and a way to regularly gauge their progress. They need to have explicit, deliberate practice in discrete skills (handwriting, spelling, sentence formation) while at the same time watch the writing process be modeled, participate in group collaborative writes, and guided as they begin to produce their own pieces independently. When given the scaffolds, deliberate practice in skills, and supported in how to set goals, students thrive. Voyager Sopris Learning’s *Step Up to Writing*<sup>®</sup> is a good example of this approach.

**Q: How can we demystify the process of helping students learn to write and write to learn?**

**A:** The IES Practice Guides offer the clearest road maps for demystifying how to teach writing in the ways I’ve touched on so far. These are freely available [here](#).

What’s wonderful about demystifying writing with this explicit instruction is that it provides all students with the same “recipe” when learning to write. Some students will implicitly pick up on, internalize, and be able to use key features of strong writing from reading, while others

will not. When teachers provide explicit instruction and deliberate, differentiated practice to all students, this levels the playing field. It makes the processes and insider knowledge expert writers possess and the skills they have mastered freely available to every student, fulfilling Horace Mann’s vision that schools should serve as the great equalizer.

**Q: You have worked on large federal grants to study how to bridge evidence-based practices for structured writing instruction to classrooms. Tell us about what your research has found?**

**A:** Bridging what works is incredibly challenging but can be done! Our research has found that teachers learn best in community, learning alongside colleagues. To clear up time for these collaborations and support the work they do, teachers need to draw from already developed materials that align to what research shows works.

When students are taught with structured writing in these ways, we hear over and over that when learning with evidence-based writing instructional practices, students are “excited to write for the first time, producing more writing, and having more fun.”

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Voyager Sopris Learning<sup>®</sup> offers reading and writing programs that include evidence-based writing instructional practices. For information about *Voyager Passport*<sup>®</sup>, *LANGUAGE! Live*<sup>®</sup>, and *Step Up to Writing*<sup>®</sup>, visit [voyagersopris.com/SOR](http://voyagersopris.com/SOR).

# LITERACY INTERVENTION BUYER'S GUIDE

Does your literacy intervention align to these recommended strategies?

STRATEGY	Voyager <b>PASSPORT</b>	<b>LANGUAGE! Live</b>
Builds vocabulary with meaningful relationships between words and mental lexicon	✓	✓
Makes sense of sounds and phonemes	✓	✓
Uses the explicit, Structured Literacy approach	✓	✓
Helps students understand how words turn into sentences	✓	✓
Teaches idioms and multiple meanings	✓	✓
Uses technology to improve listening skills	✓	✓
Includes culturally diverse, inclusive, and equitable instructional materials	✓	✓
Is evidence- and literacy brain science-based	✓	✓
Can be used with any reading curriculum	✓	✓
Includes embedded writing instruction as well as optional writing projects	✓	✓
Presents opportunities for students to collaborate, practice speaking and listening skills	✓	✓
Improves motivation to read through listening and metacognition	✓	✓
Includes age-appropriate content and programming	✓	✓

**Both Voyager Passport (K–5) and LANGUAGE! Live (Grades 5–12) reading intervention programs check all the boxes.** These programs are designed for students who have not made adequate progress in core reading instruction and need explicit, systematic intervention to accelerate growth.

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*Programs that follow a Structured Literacy approach help students develop knowledge of language structure, which in turn supports both reading comprehension and writing.*

*—Dr. Louisa Moats, author of LANGUAGE! Live*



The vocabulary wall shows words in a 2nd grade classroom collected from the texts that students have read throughout the unit. Students can use the words in their writing.

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## How One District Found Success By Overhauling Writing Instruction

By Caitlynn Peetz

**A** more intentional focus on writing instruction is reaping big rewards for a Tennessee district.

In Sumner County, a district serving about 29,000 students, school leaders in 2019 were looking for a new, more effective way to bolster students' comprehension skills, starting in the early elementary grades.

Reading comprehension—unlike foundational skills like phonics—takes years, even a lifetime to build. As they identify words, students need to know a lot in order to make sense of what they read, and so they have to be introduced to content systematically. The idea has roots in cognitive science and the work of educator E.D. Hirsch, though research about how best to build students' background or “world knowledge” is still emerging.

Sumner County began implementing a new English/language arts curriculum that

incorporates writing as a main focus of students' lessons, pushing them beyond memoirs and personal essays to build this background knowledge. While the bulk of the writing instruction happens in students' ELA classes, other courses, like science and social studies, now also incorporate more writing projects linked to their lessons.

Charles MacArthur, a professor emeritus in the School of Education at the University of Delaware who researches writing development and instruction for struggling writers, said more than 100 studies show that intentional approaches to writing instruction benefit students' academic performance both in writing and reading—and in other subjects.

That's because students are better able to comprehend and analyze their lessons, and have more background knowledge to support their class work, he said.

But actually implementing that instruction can be difficult. Teachers are generally used to assigning memoir-type writing, es-

pecially for earlier grades, that focuses on students' personal experiences and feelings, rather than the content they're learning or the world around them. Asking a 2nd grader to write opinion essays can feel counterintuitive, initially.

The benefits, though, can be impressive. Along with improved test scores, Sumner County students' confidence has increased, both in their academics and in general, according to the district's chief academic officer, Scott Langford.

Administrators from the district shared how they went about the transition to more intentional writing instruction and the results they've seen since. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

### What prompted you to make an investment in writing instruction?

**Scott Langford, chief academic officer:** From my perspective, our reading and literacy scores were stagnant for many years. I always presumed we moved the needle for kids' reading and writing performance in high school, but what I discovered is it's a K-12 issue. You have to invest from the first time a child walks into your building.

The consensus [about our former approach] was all we ever did was: “Write about how this piece of literature makes you feel.” A couple of assessments were primarily driven by things where kids could easily read a paragraph and answer very simple facts.

So then the most common conversation you hear from students [when you ask them to write] is: “I don't know what to say” or “I don't know how to get started.”

There wasn't the background knowledge or the content knowledge around when we're asking them to write narrative. And they might not have the experiences otherwise.

So that's where we decided to invest in high-quality curriculum that builds that background knowledge and gives students work that they have a lot to say about because they just learned about it, rather than picking topics randomly.

In a fifth-grade module, for example, students learn the basics of strong, focused expository paragraphs, including informational text summaries, explanatory paragraphs, and comparison-contrast paragraphs. Students learn how to craft strong topic statements, support them with relevant text evidence, and elaborate on their ideas.

Students employ this structure to write two essays [for a module on the Nez Percé Native

American tribe]—a comparison-contrast essay about the central characters of *Thunder Rolling in the Mountains* and an explanatory essay about Chief Joseph’s “Lincoln Hall Speech” for their culminating end-of-module task, in which they demonstrate understanding of essential ideas and skills they have developed over the course of the module.

### How often do you ask students to write?

**Frankie Skinner, supervisor of federal programs:** To some extent, students are writing in some capacity every day. Along with assignments and projects, they keep what’s called a response journal, where students are constantly reflecting on what they’re learning in a written way that is more informal but still keeping them practicing their writing.

That response journal is used in almost every lesson—whether it’s just writing what they learned today, reflecting more deeply on what they learned, or just responding to how they felt about this.

### How does this progress as students get older?

**Skinner:** As kindergartners, our students begin expressing thoughts orally—listening, thinking, and speaking. Over the course of the year, they progress from one to two sentences to more, based on the content knowledge built over the course of the year.

As students progress, they begin to develop the skills through Socratic seminars to connect their thoughts to specific facts and supporting evidence, developing the skills to support their points in different types of writing. *[Editors’ note: A Socratic seminar is a teaching method that hinges on teachers asking probing questions of students, eliciting dialogue and consideration of a topic from multiple points of view.]*

By 5th grade, our students can create an original idea and develop supporting evidence from multiple texts and media. They can write an essay and express their thoughts through debates and seminars. But rooted and building on the content knowledge developed from kindergarten.

As writing standards spiral from K-5, students also spiral knowledge, expanding their understanding of literature, social studies, science, and fine arts.

The weaving together of these threads develops kids who can write, speak, and think critically and support those points with relevant content knowledge and textual evidence.

### How did Sumner County convince teachers that these writing demands aren’t ‘too hard’ for students?

**Skinner:** Teaching is a craft, and teachers want to put their own stamp on things and make their lessons their own. So we use the word “integrity” a ton during implementation and just ask that they go through it as it’s intended before they make any judgment calls. Just commit to this one year and go through it exactly as it’s asking us to and then let’s get that feedback along the way.

**Langford:** I think part of the reason that there was so little writing over the previous decades was the fact that teachers just didn’t have time to do all the prep for lessons and at the [same] time to commit to giving feedback on student writing. It doesn’t really do any good to assign student writing if you don’t give feedback; there’s no point.

So, ... yes, initially there were concerns about whether this was going to remove their voice. But then, what it really did was it removed all of this extra-heavy lifting below the surface.

We were expecting teachers to do curriculum production, assessment production, and then also teach six or seven hours a day, in addition to everything else they carry. So this is one way where we can remove that burden. It made it so much easier for us to support what we were doing because we didn’t have hundreds of, say, kindergarten teachers across the county teaching something different because you start with a baseline text and support materials.

### What was the biggest adjustment for teachers?

**Skinner:** Most teachers have been teaching one standard at a time, learning it one day then reviewing it tomorrow and having a test on Thursday, and so on. It took a little bit of time to get used to the fact that there wasn’t going to be a single standard mastered at a time, that it’s more of touching on several standards in a week, then coming back. It’s not a finality, it’s a building of knowledge along the way. It’s tough to go from being able to see a clear, definitive end goal to a standard to not necessarily seeing from the outset how everything’s connected.

There’s also this inclination to catch students up because they’re below grade level, so we’ve really had to communicate that a 2nd grader is

never going to read or write at a 2nd grade level unless they’re exposed to 2nd grade content. So we’ve moved to giving that content and scaffolding where needed instead of assuming that we need to get them all the way there first. Don’t assume that you have to do all this work to get students where they need to be; let their needs reveal themselves first.

**Langford:** If anybody tells you that it’s not challenging to move from what’s traditionally been done to instruction with a commitment to writing and verbal expression, they’re lying. You have to give teachers permission to understand that it’s productive struggle.

We live in an age where we expect everything to be done perfectly the first time, and you have to give your teachers and administrators the freedom to understand that we’re not going to get this right from the very start. But it is worth the risk because we can see that our literacy rates have been stagnant, sometimes for five or 10 years. It’s worth taking that risk to see real growth.

### What have you noticed in terms of students’ comprehension?

**Langford:** Before, I could tell the quality of the school I was in based on the type of student work hanging up in the hallway. Now, we routinely see English-learner students writing paragraphs and seeing their work displayed in the hallway, which we did not see anything like that before.

The self-esteem boost kids get out of that is a big deal, too, because they’re not just getting used to talking about what they see or how things make them feel, but they’re grounding that in knowledge that they’ve acquired, so their confidence grows by leaps and bounds.

**Skinner:** I would argue even with our work, we’re still kind of just beginning to figure out how to really assess comprehension. Before, we found some students were really good at guessing at their decodable readers, using cueing strategies to figure out the answers.

So now that we can tease it out and understand that kids have a strong foundational base and they’re able to sound out the words and understand, now we can truly begin to measure their comprehension. We’re going to be able to see where those gaps are between what they’ve read and what their finished product looks like to see where the holes are in their comprehension. Unless you have all those pieces of the equation, you can’t truly identify students’ needs. ■





—Jorm Sangsom/iStock/Getty

## OPINION

Published December 15, 2022

# The Heavy Cost of Ignoring the Science of Reading for Teachers and Students

Teachers are struggling, students are the casualties

By Elise Lovejoy

**T**he reading wars are back in full swing in the form of a very public battle that gives lots of attention to people and opinions instead of facts. An important fact, not opinion, is that children are struggling to read. To be exact, two-thirds of American 4th graders cannot read proficiently, according to the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress. People fighting to keep their positions of power or assert their dominance in the reading field are causing a mess for our teachers to wade through.

The people with the most prestigious professional associations get their voices heard. The people with the most expensive degrees get their advice translated as truths. And the people with the biggest followings continue to have the final say even after their words have proved to be untruthful.

When I was a young K-2 teacher myself, I, too, listened to all the biggest voices in the reading field, assuming they had done their

research on reading and knew the best ways to support students. I had graduated from college with a degree in elementary education, received a glossy curriculum in my first school district, and read the pedagogy manuals as if they contained absolute laws.

What I didn't understand in all my naiveté is that I had learned about reading programs, not reading methods, and that my first district bought a reading program based on a sales pitch without the assertion that it taught reading in the way that children learned. Instead of focusing on phonics, the students and I huddled in guided-reading groups and did picture walks. I facilitated guessing words based on the sentence, the first letter sound, or the picture provided.

It wasn't until I watched other teachers focus on sounds and sound spellings in my next district that I even knew there was a problem with how I had been teaching reading. All of a sudden, words began to make sense to me, and my students could read books and text without pictures or predictable sentence cues.

But even with my new understanding, the

materials, resources, and support I needed were scarce. I spent my nights and weekends on the internet gathering decodable books and activities that required students to practice sound-based skills, not whole-language memorization. In my subsequent districts, I felt tension with my colleagues who did not question their curriculum or the sources they were derived from. I bumped up against administrators who encouraged methods that pushed children to guess at words.

When I began my own in-depth research on the cognitive science behind reading instruction, I threw myself into developing my own curriculum and resources. As I talk to colleagues who have traveled a similar path for reading instruction, as I fight my own sons' school district to see the disparity in reading scores, and as I read emails and posts by other literacy teachers, there is a shattering theme: Teachers are struggling.

Teachers are forced to find best practices, training, and resources for literacy during their personal time and often on their own dime.

Teachers are finding that they did not learn the correct skills or knowledge in their own education programs to systematically teach reading.

Teachers are working in communities filled with infighting because some of their colleagues cling to the failing methods.

Teachers are angry that former "experts," mentors, professors, and administrators pushed methods that were most effective for children of privilege who had supplemental resources and support at home—an approach that left countless students behind.

Teachers are mired with guilt for those students they left behind by following shoddy reading curricula.

Teachers are going against their districts' outdated reading methods to ensure all their kids can read, even at the risk of retaliation or punishment.

Teachers are fighting their way through the noise, all while trying to do the million other jobs we have given them.

I was one of many teachers who once taught balanced literacy but struggled to learn the correct way—reading methods founded and based on sounds and sound-spellings supported by reliable research on how children learn to read. I am just one of many other teachers living in the ruins of the reading wars, often blamed for the failures even as we fought to find the solutions to help children.

As that teacher, I am still trying to forgive myself for the students I once taught to guess their way through books with pictures and pre-

dictable sentences until the books lost the pictures and became too hard to guess accurately. The children whose families do not have the financial means to support them when my districts' chosen reading program couldn't meet their needs. The students who never learned to read and now struggle academically. The students who felt stupid because I never taught them *how* to read.

I, too, am one of the countless parents of a struggling reader. As a mom, I want both my sons to feel supported so that one day they can find the joy in a good book.

I am one in a growing village of science of reading advocates speaking at school board meetings in our district about the inequity that comes from not teaching reading in a structured, scientific, and systematic way. As a community member, I want my district administrators to do their jobs, the research, and their due diligence instead of making excuses for low reading scores.

The reading wars have become a battlefield for influential adults to fight for their own reputations, personal feelings, and egos. Education should be grounded in science about how our children learn and how we can support that learning process as effectively as possible. The people who count most—the reason we became teachers and the ones who hold our hearts as parents—are the children, and we can't afford to keep letting them down in service of the comfort of adults.

Our children need teachers who feel prepared, educated, and supported in methods based on the cognitive way children learn to read, before any more of them become collateral damage in this public battle. They need us to keep our focus on children, not the well-funded adults who are defending outdated and unfounded reading methods with their opinions. ■

*Elise Lovejoy, a former K-2 teacher, is the founder of Express Readers, a K-2 foundational skills and reading program. She is an advocate for evidence-based literacy instruction and the mother of two boys who are both learning to read.*



—iStock/Getty Images

## OPINION

Published September 8, 2021

# Teachers, More Than Programs, Make for Great Reading Instruction

The label “balanced literacy” serves no one

By Irene C. Fountas & Gay Su Pinnell

**T**he new school year appears poised to usher in a fresh collection of unwelcome challenges. Many schools are making difficult decisions about remote, in-person, and hybrid instruction. And teachers and students are forced to rapidly switch gears as public-health guidelines shift.

Amid this upheaval and adding to the tension is the latest chapter in the reading wars. We believe this round of conflict, like the previous ones, is harmful to our profession and has real potential for confusing children as well as teachers and administrators.

Over the decades, beliefs about the “right” way to teach reading have vacillated widely, from rigidly scripted phonics approaches that have the potential to take the interest and joy out of reading to romantic approaches that seem to expect children to figure it out themselves while having pleasurable literacy experiences. Throughout our long professional partnership with schools and teachers, we have experienced periods of polarization and

don’t see them as productive nor in service to the children who should be at the center of what we do. We also feel it’s important to have a voice in this conversation to support teachers using our literacy resources and to clarify some ways our work has been misrepresented.

We begin with some common ground far from the unproductive poles:

- We can all agree that too many children are not reading proficiently in the early years of school, which makes their futures less hopeful.
- Most educators agree that learning to read is not a process in which children simply teach themselves; the great majority of students need good instruction, and all students can benefit from it.
- A strong literacy program must include daily, explicit phonics and word study, and teachers must have excellent knowledge of the alphabetic system and how it works to teach children to read.

- We want our students to become competent, voluminous, voluntary readers who continue to learn from and use literacy all their lives.

We need strong instruction in reading and writing to assure equitable outcomes for each child. It will surely take all of us, working together, to accomplish this challenging goal. Throughout our work with schools, we have observed the way educators work together, even if initially their views on the reading process differ, in the interest of each individual child.

Any approach that overemphasizes one aspect of literacy over another will likely neglect other important areas. Building on the work of a variety of literacy researchers, we developed our own view of a comprehensive approach to literacy learning. We advocate literacy approaches that avoid emphasizing one aspect of literacy at the expense of another and instead address the orchestration of the elements of effective reading—phonemic awareness, phonics, accuracy, fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and engagement. We aim to provide instruction that is deeply connected so that school makes sense to children, and they learn how written language is connected to spoken language.

Confusions surrounding approaches to literacy instruction are compounded because commonly used labels are not clearly understood. For example, we have been characterized as advocates of something labeled “balanced literacy.” In our first book, *Guided Reading*, which was published in 1996, we used the word “balanced” as an adjective when describing a high-quality language and literacy environment with both small-group and whole-group differentiated instruction. Since that time, “balanced literacy” has become a label that can mean different things to different people. Rather than applying a label, we have always advocated for educators to describe their rationales and practices rather than label their approach. We believe labels such as “balanced literacy” serve no one.

Both classroom- and laboratory-based research have proved the importance of phonics instruction, but such research has not identified any particular kind of phonics instruction to be better than others, nor has it identified a need to use a particular kind of text. Our curriculum resources include daily phonics instruction within a comprehensive set of related practices. We believe children need both explicit instruction and the opportunity to apply knowledge while reading and writing continuous text.

Our conclusion is that there cannot be a one-

size-fits-all approach. The responsibility to the child belongs to the teacher and not a “program.”

While we do not object to the data and research being put forth by advocates of what is called the science of reading, we do have concerns about the narrow interpretations that may arise from it. We caution against sweeping policy decisions that override the judgment of local educators.

As educators, we serve a highly diverse student population, including many children who come to school with disadvantages. Individuals have different needs and learn in different ways. There is no quick fix, nor is there one way that all children must learn. We do see patterns in children’s literacy development, but expert teachers tune in to individual needs and strengths and thoughtfully adapt the way they teach. This is responsive teaching. These small but constant instructional decisions make teaching powerful enough to make a difference.

The challenges ahead remind us of the vital importance of education leadership at every level—district, school, and classroom. As you adjust to the new challenges this school year is likely to present, lean into the practices you have observed make a positive impact on the emotional, social, and literacy outcomes of students. Those practices, with a tweak here and there, stand the test of time in supporting learners. Also, continue to build and nurture a collaborative, supportive culture that rests on the shared values of your learning community.

Advancing children’s literacy learning and elevating the expertise of teachers has been and continues to be our life’s work. There will always be different views, but we believe our energy should be directed toward collaborating, problem-solving, and thoughtfully examining the curriculum and the teaching to make them more effective for children.

Our message today is that—especially at the start of another challenging school year—if we work together and not against each other, we stand a better chance of ensuring that all children have the chance to live a literate life. ■

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