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Literacy & Language Education

EDITOR'S NOTE

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the needs of English-language learners and differently-abled students. In this Spotlight, review what may be missing in teacher training and the supports offered to students with dyslexia; discovered how literacy can be strengthened indirectly; and uncover how simple things can make a big difference.

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Overlooked: How Teacher Training Falls Short for English-Learners and Students With IEPs

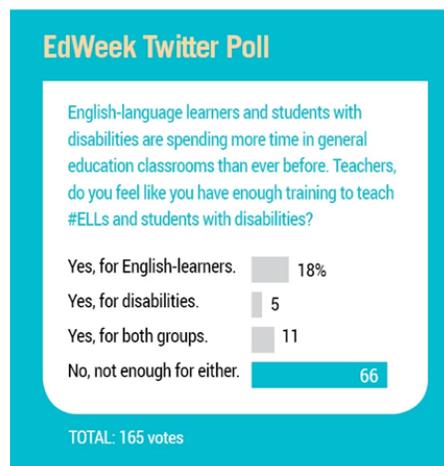
By Corey Mitchell

English-language learners and students with disabilities—groups of children once taught in isolated classrooms with specially trained instructors—spend more time in general education classrooms now than in years past.

But many general education teachers are not equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to meet the needs of English-learners or students with disabilities, researchers have found. It’s an issue that could be tackled at least partly through school and districtwide professional development, but the knowledge teachers need does not always reach them.

“There’s been a large increase in students who come from diverse backgrounds that are in schools and unfortunately, in many instances, teachers aren’t adequately prepared to address their needs,” said Jennifer Flores Samson, an associate professor and the chairwoman of special education at the Hunter College School of Education in New York City.

Samson—whose research focuses on how teachers can better serve students who are culturally, linguistically, and ability diverse—has studied whether teachers in states with sizable English-learner populations are adequately prepared to work with those students.



She reached a sobering conclusion: They’re not.

Federal data indicate that 6.7 million students with disabilities, and 4.8 million English-learners are enrolled in public K-12 schools in the United States.

Millions of those students are spending much of their days in general education classrooms, often with teachers not specifically trained to work with them.

In some states, task forces and commissions have tackled the issue, offering recommendations to remedy the problem. In other parts of the country, educators have turned to

regional education agencies or colleges of education to fill the professional development gap.

In 2015, California’s Statewide Task Force on Special Education released a report that found students across all categories of disability spend less time learning in general education classrooms than their peers in all but three other states.

“Too often, neither general education nor special education teachers are well prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities in a general education classroom,” the report concludes.

That’s a problem in a state where roughly 10 percent of students receive special education services, said Mildred Browne, a former California special education administrator of the year who served on the task force. Special education students are taught in general education classrooms whenever possible, driven by federal policy that requires teaching students in the “least restrictive environment” that is appropriate for them.

To that end, general education teachers who work with students with disabilities need to know how to do three things well, Browne said: Read and understand individualized education plans, teach reading, and keep families informed about their students’ progress.

Knowing how to read IEPs is key, Browne said, because students with disabilities often struggle in general education classrooms when teachers don’t understand their needs.

Teachers, especially those who work with students with dyslexia or language-based disabilities, must know the nuts and bolts of reading instruction and vocabulary development to give students opportunities to connect with the curriculum.

Away From Labels

When trying to train teachers to work with students who learn differently or speak a language other than English, the focus should be on the students, not the labels attached to them, researchers and practitioners say.

Teachers should spend more time homing in on the needs of students because “too often disability is seen as something separate from general education,” said Christine Ashby, an associate professor in the teaching and leadership department at Syracuse University’s School of Education.

“The instruction that’s given to [general education] teachers tends to be disability-of-the-week focused,” said Ashby. “It’s much more about learning to see kids as individuals than it is about learning, ‘This is what autism is,

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Want to improve literacy for Emergent Bilinguals? **Get them talking.**

Most people understand the importance of literacy and the vital role it plays in laying the foundation for future success. But what's not as generally understood is the connection between oral language acquisition and literacy development.

Research shows that oral language plays a critical role in reading instruction and has a powerful impact on children's success.¹ And while it might be assumed that language learning should come first, it's also been shown that effective literacy instruction should happen alongside opportunities for oral language development. This is even more critical for Emergent Bilingual students, also known as English Learners (ELs)—the fastest growing group of students in grades K–12.²

Why Emergent Bilingual?



When describing English Learners in the US, schools commonly use the terms "EL" or "ELL." This terminology emphasizes what these students don't know, as opposed to what they do. As a result, schools fail to recognize the benefit of English language learning: becoming bilingual. The term "Emergent Bilingual" celebrates the asset of bilingualism that these students bring to the classroom and to society.³

Creating a strong oral language foundation



Children begin to acquire oral language skills at a young age, before turning their attention to reading.¹ For educators, it's important to understand the six areas of oral language, as together they play a key role in reading instruction and long-term reading comprehension.^{1,4}

Acquiring levels of oral language proficiency is especially critical for Emergent Bilinguals, enabling their ongoing learning and achievement.⁵ To learn the English language, they need frequent opportunities to speak it. In fact, this is one of the most important ways to help newly arrived Emergent Bilinguals develop language skills.⁶ They also need access to competent English speakers, frequent modeling, an atmosphere in which they feel comfortable speaking, and feedback that encourages elaboration.⁷

Typically, Emergent Bilinguals first develop receptive language, meaning they can understand what they hear or read. But they must also be taught expressive language, or the ability to express themselves through verbal communication. This supports literacy skills, allows Emergent Bilinguals to participate in classroom discussions, and enables them to demonstrate what they know during assessments.⁵

Six areas of oral language

- 1 **Phonology**—the organization or system of sounds within a language
- 2 **Vocabulary**—includes expressive vocabulary, the words a student actively uses, and receptive vocabulary, the words that a student understands but may not necessarily use
- 3 **Grammar**—the set of structural rules that govern the combination of words and phrases into sentences and paragraphs
- 4 **Morphology**—the smallest units of meaning within a word and the rules about how those words are formed
- 5 **Pragmatics**—the social use of language, including social norms
- 6 **Discourse**—oral and written communication

Language and literacy should be taught concurrently

Oral language provides a solid foundation from which students can advance their literacy skills. However, for Emergent Bilinguals, this does not mean that oral language has to be developed first. For greater success, language and literacy should be taught concurrently.

Studies support this. Research has shown that, for Emergent Bilinguals, phonological awareness in the native language predicts successful literacy acquisition in both the native language and a second language.⁸

Educators should provide Emergent Bilinguals with daily opportunities to learn and practice oral English, while simultaneously teaching reading and other content areas.⁹ There are many ways to blend both reading and speaking instruction for Emergent Bilinguals, including: engaging them in discussion groups of mixed skill levels; creating print-rich classroom environments; reading stories with expression and intonation; and incorporating adaptive blended learning technology, proven to be an effective way to support Emergent Bilinguals by combining English language and academic learning.¹



Get additional tips for blending reading and speaking instruction in the Lexia white paper, **Let's Talk: How Oral Language Supports Literacy for Emergent Bilinguals.**

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“
Language development is important and crucial and should be incorporated, but ... culture should be the starting point.”

JANET HIATT

FORMER ENGLISH-LEARNER
TEACHER LEADER, DES MOINES
SCHOOL DISTRICT

this is what learning disabilities are.”

Janet Hiatt, a former English-learner teacher leader in the Des Moines school district, now helps train educators who work with English-learners in central Iowa. She and Samson both suggest that building and district-level administrators, along with teachers, need training to support the inclusion of English-learners.

In a study published in the *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*, Hiatt and a colleague collected data on teachers' perceived preparedness to work with English-learners.

“Language development is important and crucial and should be incorporated, but ... culture should be the starting point,” Hiatt said. “They need to know relevant ELL-specific background” such as each student's native country, prior education, and literacy level in their first language.

“All of that information informs what they're going to do in their classrooms,” Hiatt said.

Hiatt also recommends that schools focus on inclusive leadership, not just teaching strategies; research indicates that, in order to help students succeed, school administrators must be equally prepared to support the teachers and students.

That may include developing plans for sustained professional development and avoiding one-day or short-term workshops. Schools should opt instead for training that focuses on helping general education and English-as-a-second-language teachers co-plan lessons and share and analyze data.

Mary Lynn Boscardin, the president of the Council for Exceptional Children, an international organization dedicated to im-

proving the educational success of students with disabilities and gifted and talented students, said most teachers have the content knowledge to work with all students. Where they need support is in developing strategies to collaborate and communicate with families and colleagues.

Before the shift to more inclusion, “each teacher had their own classroom, they were pretty much ... isolated,” said Boscardin, a professor of special education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. “Now we're transitioning into a teamwork framework.”

In a 2012 report prepared for the Center for American Progress, a left-leaning think tank, Samson and a colleague also found many teachers were ill-prepared to work with English-learners.

While evidence exists that preparation and training have improved in the time since, Samson still thinks the recommendations for professional development she outlined in the report—including focusing on oral language development, academic language, and cultural diversity—remain relevant.

That means teachers working with English-learners must be aware of the similarities and differences between first- and second-language development, and the importance of nonverbal communications and visual aids in language acquisition; recognize the difference between conversational language and academic language—the vocabulary that helps students understand story problems or science concepts, which can be difficult for native-English speakers to grasp and is often even tougher for ELLs; and, perhaps most importantly, teachers must recognize that the cultural norms of their classrooms may be vastly different than what students experience at home.

“They need to support the soft skills of teachers in understanding the backgrounds of the students they work with, the cultures, the families, the socioemotional needs, the challenges they face in the context in which the children live, is really critical,” Samson said.

Administrators must prepare new teachers, even those who had preservice training, to work with English-learners or special education students, because they “have no idea what they don't know,” Samson said. “They are going to walk into the classroom on that first day and be shell-shocked.” ■

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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 be restraining to understand what their masked teachers are saying in class.

A year later, 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 asynchronous 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 focus 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?’”

Students in middle and high school may be able to advocate for themselves and seek help in office hours or through private online chats, but students in early elementary school have



often not developed those skills, said Joanne Pierson, project manager for Dyslexia Help at the University of Michigan. The website serves as a resource for people with dyslexia and their parents and employers. Pierson, a speech and language pathologist by training, also runs a private clinical practice that specializes in helping students with dyslexia.

“Keeping those children engaged, when you can’t do something subtle like walk around the classroom and stand next to them or gently put your hand on their shoulder or notice when they’re looking lost, has to be tough,” Pierson said. “All those subtle things that teachers do to keep kids on track. Those are big challenges, particularly if you don’t have a parent sitting there with the child because many parents are working. I work with kids one-on-one. So I can say things like, ‘Are you with me?’ or ‘I’m on page whatever in the middle of the paragraph’ and show it to them. That’s a whole different ballgame when you have 25 or 30 students.”

Schools must also remember that a year into the pandemic, some students still struggle to understand how to use technology.

3. Rethink how and what you teach

Teachers cannot take what worked in the traditional classroom and try to transfer it to an online setting. When they make changes, they must consider the needs of students with language-based learning disabilities, especially disabilities 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.” ■



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Published December 16, 2020

Is This the End of ‘Three Cueing’?

By Sarah Schwartz

Cueing has, for decades now, been a staple of early reading instruction.

The strategy—which is also known as three-cueing, or MSV—involves prompting students to draw on context and sentence structure, along with letters, to identify words. But it isn’t the most effective way for beginning readers to learn how to decode printed text.

Research has shown that encouraging kids to check the picture when they come to a tricky

word, or to hypothesize what word would work in the sentence, can take their focus away from the word itself—lowering the chances that they’ll use their understanding of letter sounds to read through the word part-by-part, and be able to recognize it more quickly the next time they see it.

Still, three-cueing is everywhere: in curriculum materials that instruct teachers to prompt students with “think what kind of word would fit;” in classroom anchor charts that encourage making a guess after looking at the first letter of the word and the illustration on the page; in popular assessment tools.

Reporting over the last few years, from American Public Media, Education Week, and others, has demonstrated the extent to which these strategies pervade early literacy instruction, and explained why the research suggests they aren’t effective tools for instructing young readers in cracking the alphabetic code.

In 2019, an EdWeek Research Center survey found that 75 percent of K-2 and elementary special education teachers use the method to teach students how to read, and 65 percent of college of education professors teach it.

Now, there are signs that cueing’s hold on reading instruction may be loosening. Recently, one of the most influential reading programs in the country took a step away from the method—raising questions about whether other publishers will follow suit, and whether changes to written materials will lead to shifts in classroom practice.

‘Cautiously Optimistic’

In a document that circulated fall 2020, the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, which develops the popular Units of Study for Teaching Reading curriculum, lays out a series of changes to its philosophy of early reading instruction.

Lucy Calkins, the founding director of TCRWP, is one of the biggest players in the early reading market: Her Units of Study curriculum, commonly known as “reading workshop,” is used by 16 percent of K-2 and elementary special education teachers, according to the 2019 EdWeek Research Center survey. The recent document covers a range of issues, from phonics instruction to text types to addressing dyslexia. And it outlines a new approach to word-solving for the organization that steps away from cueing.

“The TCRWP has always recommended

that teachers coach kids who encounter unfamiliar words to be active word solvers, but until recently, we have encouraged kids to draw on all their resources to word solve, which meant both asking, ‘What word would make sense there?’ and also asking, ‘What do the letters say?’” Calkins wrote in an emailed statement to Education Week in late October 2020. (Calkins declined an on-the-record phone interview with Education Week.)

“We are now recommending that for readers in the early stages of reading development, there are times for prompting for meaning and times for prompting for word solving.” When a student is “stuck on an unfamiliar word,” she wrote, “it is important that teachers prompt kids to draw on their phonics knowledge.”

This does represent a shift in approach, said P. David Pearson, an emeritus professor and the former dean of the University of California, Berkeley’s Graduate School of Education. But he argues that it’s more of a “tweak” than a radical overhaul.

“She’s saying, go for the code first, and then add in the meaning,” Pearson said. “But I think she would say that it’s still a balanced approach, and you’re still using all the resources available to you.”

Laura Stewart, national director of The Reading League, an organization that advocates for science-based reading instruction, said she is “cautiously optimistic” that the changes could bring a significant shift in how teachers think about cueing. Still, she said of Calkins, “it feels like her evolution has a lot to do with defending her turf.”

Calkins, for her part, says that the changes were prompted by a close reading of research, work with teachers and students, and a partnership with the Child Mind Institute, an organization that supports children with mental health and learning disorders. She claims that EdWeek articles regarding the program have “fueled controversies.”

“We do children and teachers a disservice when we divide ourselves into camps, demonizing and misrepresenting each other,” she wrote, in the statement. “I’ve tried, instead, to listen and learn from proponents of the science of reading, and to encourage other balanced literacy educators to do so as well.”

Change on the Horizon?

Research on the importance of [explicit, systematic phonics](#)—and the comparative ineffectiveness of using contextual and syntactic cues to identify words—has existed for decades. For now, though, other major literacy players that

What Is ‘Cueing’? A Key to the Terms

Cueing is a commonly used strategy in early reading instruction, in which teachers prompt students to draw on multiple sources of information to identify words. It’s based on the now disproven theory that reading is a series of strategic guesses, informed by context clues.

The strategy is also referred to as “**three-cueing**,” for the three different sources of information that teachers tell students to use: 1) meaning drawn from context or pictures, 2) syntax, and 3) visual information, meaning letters or parts of words.

Many teachers also refer to cueing as **MSV**, an acronym that stands for each of the three sources of information: meaning, structure/syntax, and visual.

employ cueing in their instructional methods haven’t announced similar shifts.

Education Week also asked Fountas and Pinnell, one of the most popular early reading programs, whether it planned to make any changes to how its materials prompted children to identify words. Current versions of the [materials for early readers](#) instruct teachers to prompt students with the questions, “What would make sense?” and “Does it look right?” Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, authors of the program, declined comment through their publisher, Heinemann.

Reading Recovery, a popular reading intervention approach that also uses cueing, did not note any specific upcoming changes to the method. However, Billy Molasso, the executive director of the Reading Recovery Council of North America, said that the organization does not view reading instruction as “static.”

“[A]s we learn more about literacy processing and our students and teachers change over time, we have to continue to refine our strategies, enhance our instructional dexterity, and integrate better ways to meet the specific struggles of our emerging readers,” he wrote in a statement to Education Week. “We look forward to continued robust conversations about how to strengthen early literacy education.”

Still, addressing the persistence of cueing is a challenge that goes beyond curricula, said Emily Solari, a professor of reading education at the University of Virginia’s Curry School of Education and Human Development.

“We have generations of teachers who haven’t been provided adequate training on how to teach reading, through no fault of their own,” she said. “There are multiple things you have to push on—and just changing one curriculum, even a widely purchased and used curriculum, it’s not a silver bullet.”

Some reading teachers agree.

“If teachers aren’t strong in their knowledge about how kids read and how kids write, changes in the curricula are not, in my personal opinion, going to make a big shift,” said Jeanne Schopf, a middle school reading specialist, interventionist, and coach in Sturgeon Bay, Wis. “They’re going to go back to what they’re comfortable doing.”

Schopf, who has taught both elementary and middle school in her 31 years as an educator, said she’d like to see institutional shifts at teachers’ colleges and universities. If teachers don’t learn about evidence-based practices there, it can be hard to introduce them later, she said.

For David Pelc, the process of instructional change is deeply interpersonal and gradual. When Pelc, an elementary reading interventionist in Romulus, Mich., started learning more about explicit, systematic early reading instruction, he introduced it to teachers “little by little,” he said.

He had conversations with teachers who he knew trusted his perspective; he worked alongside others in their classrooms, demonstrating phonemic awareness activities they could do with their students. “I didn’t say, ‘Hey, this is what we need to do; it makes more sense.’ I would say, ‘Hey, check this out, it’s so cool,’” he said.

Now, of course, there’s an additional layer of challenge involved in any change process: Teachers are overwhelmed with the demands of distance learning, and school and district leaders are stretched thin.

But Pelc also wonders whether teachers’ willingness to try out new strategies during this time might open a door. He’s put together screencasts demonstrating evidence-based instruction, and a few teachers have men-

tioned to him that they've watched them.

"Both teachers and students are getting more resourceful," Pelc said. "They're looking for information and getting it faster."

Origins of Cueing

TCRWP doesn't generally use the phrase "cueing" to describe its approach to reading and writing instruction. Even so, the strategies and philosophies that underlie this approach have been a part of the instruction in the program, and in other widely used early reading curricula.

The idea that children use "cueing systems" to read was popularized by several influential reading researchers in the 1960s and '70s.

Kenneth Goodman, the late education researcher who was considered the founding father of whole language, theorized that good readers make predictions about what the words on the page say by drawing on multiple sources of information. This theory was largely based on Goodman's analysis of students' errors, or "miscues," while reading.

He saw that students might use graphic information—i.e., the letters—to phonetically decode the word, or part of it. But they also use their understanding of syntax, suggesting incorrect words that nonetheless conform to the structure of written language, and their grasp on the meaning of the story, predicting words that would complete a coherent thought.

Within this framework, the goal of the reading teacher is not to make sure that beginning readers attend to every part of every word, but to "help them to select the most productive cues," Goodman wrote.

At the same time, New Zealand researcher Marie Clay was developing running records—a system of analyzing students' oral reading errors with a similar philosophical underpinning to Goodman's work. Teachers listen to students read a book or passage, and for every miscue, note which source of information students are drawing on that caused them to make the error: meaning, syntax, or visual information (letters).

Running records are a cornerstone of Reading Recovery, the intervention program Clay developed. But they're also widely used as an assessment tool outside of Reading Recovery, and a key piece of many packaged reading programs.

Over the past few decades, research has disproved the theory that fluent word reading is the result of a highly sophisticated predicting process. Instead, studies have shown that strong readers attend to the letters in words.

After sounding out a new word a few times, that word becomes recognizable on sight through a process called orthographic mapping. Proficient readers don't need to rely on context or syntax to identify what words say.

Still, listening to students' errors while reading can be "very useful," said Nell Duke, a professor of literacy, language, and culture at the University of Michigan School of Education. With the right tools, teachers can discern which sounds students are struggling with, or whether students are monitoring their comprehension.

"But the MSV approach to doing so I think has led to a lot of misconceptions," Duke said.

The running record is "such an open-ended tool that it's not really clear what to do with what you find," she said. For example, if a student uses context to guess at a word, and gets it

“

I have always held the position that every single child is entitled to systematic, explicit phonics instruction, and that every school must adopt a planned, sequential phonics curriculum.”

LUCY CALKINS

THE FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF TCRWP

wrong, how should a teacher respond?

Some teachers, Duke said, will praise a miscue as long as it makes sense in context—for instance reading the word bunny in place of rabbit. "It's definitely true that it's better that it make sense than not make sense, but it's very important that it not just make sense, but be the actual word," she said.

Not a 'Zero-Sum Game'

Calkins said that TCWRP has made revisions to the Units of Study in Phonics and K-2 Units of Study in Reading curricula to reflect a change in its prompting approach.

The revisions affect, on average, about six

pages in each of the 20 phonics books and each of the 20 reading books, and they will be in the next reprint. This new approach was also discussed at a recent free online TCRWP teacher conference, with about 7,000 participants in attendance, Calkins said.

Simply telling teachers to prompt students in a different order may not uproot the more entrenched issues with cueing, Solari, the University of Virginia professor, cautioned. Importantly, she said, students need explicit instruction in phonics before the prompt "look at the letters" can yield any results.

Calkins' materials include a dedicated phonics component, though it wasn't introduced until 2018. Still, Calkins said she has always supported foundational skills instruction, including assisting schools in implementing other phonics curricula, like Foundations and Words Their Way, together with the Units of Study in Reading.

"I have always held the position that every single child is entitled to systematic, explicit phonics instruction, and that every school must adopt a planned, sequential phonics curriculum," she wrote to Education Week.

Without a foundation in letter-sound correspondences, students may pronounce words incorrectly, which could lead to their teachers trying a different cue, Solari said.

"Is it the most awful thing in the world if a kid reaches an unknown word and they're trying to sound it out, and then they move forward and figure it out by the context? It's not," Solari said. But, she stressed, it's better if they can decode it.

"If they're having a hard time figuring out one word, they're probably having trouble figuring out the other words. So using the context is not even on the table," she added.

Of course, researchers emphasize, this doesn't mean that students shouldn't pay attention to the meaning and structure of the text that they're reading.

In an often-cited 1998 article on cueing, reading researcher Marilyn Jager Adams wrote that semantic and syntactic knowledge are essential to reading. They, in addition to the ability to read printed words, are all equally necessary for understanding the meaning of a text.

"If the original premise of the three-cueing system was that the reason for reading the words is to understand the text, it has since been oddly converted such that, in effect, the reason for understanding the text is in order to figure out the words," Adams wrote.

In her statement to Education Week, Calkins indicated that teachers can prompt students to think about meaning—but in moments when they're trying to comprehend text they've already read, not when they're

still working on decoding it.

It's a subtle, but very important, distinction, said Duke, who created a chart to support teachers in deciding when to use prompts related to meaning. "Before they identify the word, they really need to be looking at letters

and groups of letters in the word to figure out what that word is," she said. After the child has correctly read a sentence, she said, then they can use context to figure out the meaning of any word they don't understand.

"What I'd like to see is not the perpetuation

that it's an either or, that it's a zero-sum game. That somehow if you focus on the foundational skills, that somehow you're detracting from meaning," said Stewart, of The Reading League. "Phonics, having kids sound out words, is the runaway to meaning." ■



— Getty

Published on December 3, 2019

The Most Popular Reading Programs Aren't Backed by Science

By Sarah Schwartz

There's a settled body of research on how best to teach early reading. But when it comes to the multitude of curriculum choices that schools have, it's often hard to parse whether well-marketed programs abide by the evidence.

And making matters more complicated, there's no good way to peek into every elementary reading classroom to see what materials teachers are using.

"It's kind of an understudied issue," said Mark Seidenberg, a cognitive scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the author of *Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It*. "[These programs] are put out by large publishers that aren't very forthcoming. It's very hard for researchers to get

a hold of very basic data about how widely they're used."

Now, some data are available. In a nationally representative survey, the Education Week Research Center asked K-2 and special education teachers what curricula, programs, and textbooks they had used for early reading instruction in their classrooms.

The top five include three sets of core instructional materials, meant to be used in whole-class settings: The Units of Study for Teaching Reading, developed by the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, and *Journeys* and *Into Reading*, both by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. There are also two early interventions, which target specific skills certain students need more practice on: Fountas & Pinnell's *Leveled Literacy Intervention* and *Reading Recovery*.

An Education Week analysis of the materials found many instances in which these pro-

grams diverge from evidence-based practices for teaching reading or supporting struggling students.

At this point, it's widely accepted that reading programs for young kids need to include phonics—and every one of these five programs teaches about sound-letter correspondences. What varies, though, is the nature of this instruction. In some cases, students master a progression of letter-sound relationships in a set-out sequence. In others, phonics instruction is less systematic, raising the possibility that students might not learn or be assessed on certain skills.

Phonics is "buried" in many commercial reading programs, Seidenberg said. Teachers might be able to use what's there to construct a coherent sequence, he said, or they might not.

And frequently, these programs are teaching students to approach words in ways that could undermine the phonics instruction they are receiving.

Several of these interventions and curricula operate under the understanding that students use multiple sources of information, or "cues," to solve words. Those can include the letters on the page, the context in which the word appears, pictures, or the grammatical structure of the sentence.

Observational studies show that poor readers do use different sources of information to predict what words might say. But studies also suggest that skilled readers don't read this way. Neuroscience research has shown that skilled readers process all of the letters in words when they read them, and that they read connected text very quickly.

Even so, many early reading programs are designed to teach students to make better guesses, under the assumption that it will make children better readers. The problem is that it trains kids to believe that they don't always need to look at all of the letters that make up words in order to read them.

Still, teachers may not know that cueing strategies aren't in line with the scientific evidence base around teaching reading, said Heidi Beverine-Curry, the co-founder of The Reading League, an organization that pro-

motes science-based reading instruction.

Classroom teachers also aren't usually the people making decisions about what curriculum to use. In Education Week's survey, 65 percent of teachers said that their district selected their primary reading programs and materials, while 27 percent said that the decision was up to their school.

Even when teachers want to question their school or district's approach, they may feel pressured to stay silent. Education Week spoke with three teachers from different districts who requested that their names not be used in this story, for fear of repercussions from their school systems.

Cueing Strategies Persist

Reading Recovery, the 1st grade intervention used by about 20 percent of teachers surveyed, was developed in the 1970s by New Zealand researcher Marie Clay. Thirty-minute lessons are delivered one-on-one, and generally follow a similar structure day to day. The idea is to catch students early before they need more intensive intervention, said Jeff Williams, a Reading Recovery Teacher-Leader in the Solon school district in Ohio.

Students read books they've read several times before, and then read a book that they've only read once, the day before, while the teacher takes a "running record." Here, the teacher marks the words that the student reads incorrectly and notes which cue the child apparently used to produce the wrong word.

For example, if a child reads the word "pot" instead of "bucket," a teacher could indicate that the student was using meaning cues to figure out the word.

During the rest of the lesson, students practice letter-sound relationships, write a short story, and assemble words in a cut-up story. At the end, they read a new book.

The program also requires intensive teacher training, which is administered through partner colleges.

Fountas & Pinnell's Leveled Literacy Intervention follows a similar lesson structure, but it's delivered in a small group format rather than one-on-one.

In both programs, text is leveled according to perceived difficulty. Teachers are told to match students to books at a just-right level, with the idea that this will challenge but not overwhelm them.

Students in the lowest levels read predictable text: books in which the sentence structure is similar from page to page, and pictures present literal interpretations of what the text

says. One LLI book, for example, follows a girl as she gets dressed to go sledding in winter. "Look at my pants," the first page reads, facing an image of the girl holding up a pair of pants. "Look at my jacket," is on the next page, with a photo of the girl pointing to a jacket.

Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, the founders of LLI, declined an interview for this story through their publisher, Heinemann. The company also declined to comment.

The main point of disagreement concerns these predictable texts and the teaching methods that align to them. For Williams, the Reading Recovery teacher leader in Ohio, predictable text can be a useful orienting tool when children are still learning how print works. The repetitive sentence structure demonstrates that words have consistent meaning, and the frequent pictures provide a context to link to the words, he said.

He gave the word "hippopotamus" as an example. By pointing out that "hippopotamus" starts with the letter "h," and linking that word to a relevant picture and story context, the student can connect the word and the meaning of the word.

"When it's in isolation and we just say arbitrarily, 'This shape makes this sound,' that's a little abstract for little kids," Williams said.

But other experts say using predictable text this way teaches young children the wrong understanding of how the English language works.

"You build this foundation of, English is a language that I have to memorize," said Tiffany Peltier, a doctoral student at Oklahoma University, who studies reading instruction.

But kids don't memorize words to learn them. Instead, they decode the letter-sound correspondences. After several exposures, the word becomes recognizable on sight, through a process called orthographic mapping.

Of course, a picture of a hippopotamus can convey useful information. It could help a child understand what the animal looks like, or what it might do in the wild. But a picture of a hippo won't help the child read the word.

In predictable texts, students don't have to recognize the individual sounds in the word, said Peltier, even though learning how to do that is highly correlated with reading ability. So do Reading Recovery and LLI attend to the sounds in words at all?

Both have daily sections for letter and word work. Reading Recovery tests students on 50 phonemes when they enter the program, and teachers target the ones that students don't know, said Williams.

But basing instruction around individual student errors—rather than progressing through a

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We think about what is it that a good reader does. What is the life that a good reader leads? So above all, that means putting reading front and center.”

LUCY CALKINS

A RESEARCHER AND THE FOUNDING DIRECTOR OF THE TEACHERS COLLEGE READING AND WRITING PROJECT

systematic structure—can leave some gaps, said Kristen Koeller, the educator outreach manager at Decoding Dyslexia California, who used to be a Reading Recovery teacher.

For example, she said, she might have a student who didn't know the /ow/ sound, like in the words "how" or "wow." Koeller would work with the student on that sound, but she wasn't expected to explain the difference between when "ow" makes the /ow/ sound, like in "how," and when "ow" makes an /o/ sound, like in "show."

Phonics does happen in Reading Recovery lessons, she said. "But it is not systematic, it is not multisensory, and it depends largely on the teacher's knowledge base and the book that is selected."

LLI does include a scope and sequence for phonemic awareness and phonics instruction. But students enter the program at different points, and it's possible that they might need more practice with skills that are deemed below their level—or that they will exit the intervention before they reach all of the sound-letter correspondences that they don't know.

The company, Fountas & Pinnell Literacy, identifies two main studies that it claims validate the program's effectiveness in grades K-2. Both are from the Center for Research in Educational Policy at the University of Memphis, and both were funded by Heinemann, which publishes LLI.

The 2010 paper, which the company calls its "gold standard" study, found that kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd graders who received LLI made greater gains than students who received no intervention. But these gains were only consistent on Fountas & Pinnell's own assessment,

rather than an external validator of reading achievement. Results on DIBELS, a separate early literacy test, were mixed. Kindergartners and 1st graders in the treatment group did better than the control group on some subtests, but 2nd graders saw no difference.

Reading Recovery, by contrast, has a much stronger evidence base for effectiveness. Most notably, an independent evaluation of the federal grant expanding the program found that students who received the intervention did better on assessments of overall reading, reading comprehension, and decoding compared to similar students who received their schools' traditional literacy interventions. But even that study has invited controversy.

Psychologists James W. Chapman and William E. Tunmer published a critique of the evaluation, arguing that many of the lowest-achieving students were excluded from the program, potentially inflating success rates.

The executive director of the Reading Recovery Council of North America did not respond to requests for comment.

Three core instructional programs also made the top five most popular list among teachers, according to the Education Week survey: The Units of Study for Teaching Reading, by Heinemann, and Journeys and Into Reading, both by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Units of Study for Teaching Reading was developed by Lucy Calkins, a researcher and the founding director of the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project.

The program follows a “reader’s workshop” model. Teachers give a short “mini-lesson” at the beginning of class, and then students spend the majority of time practicing that skill independently as the teacher monitors them and works with small groups.

“We think about what is it that a good reader does. What is the life that a good reader leads?” Calkins says in a video describing reading workshop on the Units of Study website. “So above all, that means putting reading front and center.”

Calkins declined an interview for this story through her publisher, Heinemann. The company also declined to comment on the program itself.

Units of Study instills these reading habits in children, and teaches them that reading is something to value, said Susan Chambre, an assistant professor of education at Marist College in Poughkeepsie, N.Y. It also introduces a variety of genres and gives students choice in what they read. “The fact that we are immersing kids in literature—that is important,” Chambre said.

But Chambre struggled with Units of Study when she used it as a kindergarten teacher in an inclusion classroom. The program assumed a lot of knowledge—of oral language, of phonics—that students just didn’t have. Chambre would watch children mumble through sentences, making up words by looking at the pictures.

“For those kids who come in [to school] and can learn foundational skills easily, and have a fair amount of general knowledge and a fair amount of vocabulary, they would come out okay,” Meredith Liben, the senior fellow

“**Phonics instruction needs to be lean and efficient. Every minute you spend teaching phonics (or preparing phonics materials to use in your lessons) is less time spent teaching other things.”**

UNITS OF STUDY IN PHONICS EXCERPT

for strategic initiatives at Student Achievement Partners, said of the Units of Study for Teaching Reading.

But a lot of students don’t come into school with that knowledge, and the program isn’t explicit enough to fill in the gaps, Chambre said. Starting in kindergarten, students are taught reading “super powers” that encourage them to “search for meaning, use picture clues, and use the sound of the first letter of a word to help them read,” according to kindergarten sample lessons downloaded from the Heinemann website. One sample lesson encourages teachers to say things like “Check the picture,” “Try something,” or “Does that look right?” when students struggle, which prompts students to take their eyes off of the letters in a word.

In a public statement responding to science-based critiques of her program, Calkins wrote that asking students to guess or “try it” when they come to hard words teaches reading stamina. She also argued that there is val-

ue in predictable texts for young children, who are “approximating reading” when they rely on syntax and picture clues.

Though billed as a core reading program, the Units of Study in Reading doesn’t teach phonemic awareness or phonics systematically or explicitly. “At best it’s a suggestion, and there’s a lot of focus on the three-cueing system,” Liben said.

The Teachers College Reading and Writing Project recently released a separate phonics program, the Units of Study in Phonics. In her recent statement, Calkins emphasized the importance of a systematic phonics program, and said it would be a “wise move” for teachers to include more decodable texts in lessons with emerging readers. Still, marketing materials for the units imply that the company believes phonics should not play a central role in the classroom.

“Phonics instruction needs to be lean and efficient,” the materials read. “Every minute you spend teaching phonics (or preparing phonics materials to use in your lessons) is less time spent teaching other things.”

Menu of Choices

The other two core instructional programs, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt’s Journeys and Into Reading, differ in some significant ways from the rest of this list. Into Reading is the company’s newer product—this is its first academic year in schools. According to HMH, more than 6.7 million students use Journeys in school.

Both programs include an explicit, systematic program in phonemic awareness and phonics. In an emailed statement to Education Week, a representative for HMH wrote that the company suggests teachers follow this sequence, as phonics skills build cumulatively. Decodable texts are available for purchase.

Because these programs are meant to be comprehensive, they include lessons and resources for teaching other foundational skills—like writing letters, spelling, and fluency—as well as explicit vocabulary instruction, anchor texts and student texts, writing instruction, and comprehension instruction.

Seidenberg, who has reviewed the Journeys materials but not Into Reading, said that the amount of materials, lessons, and instructional choices in the program was overwhelming. “It looks like the publisher’s response to all the debate about reading instruction was to make sure that they included everything,” he said.

In the emailed statement, HMH said that teachers can “choose from a variety of resources to make the best instructional deci-

sions for their students and to align with district curriculum requirements.”

When Milton Terrace Elementary in Ballston Spa, N.Y., started using Journeys, teachers were using the materials differently, said Kathleen Chaucer, the principal. (The school is no longer using the program.) For example—even though the program offers decodable books, kids were practicing in leveled texts, which didn’t offer opportunities to use patterns they learned, Chaucer said.

Journeys includes six teacher manuals for its 1st grade program alone, Seidenberg said. “There is so much information in those teacher manuals, it raises serious questions about whether anyone is actually using them,” he said. “And if they are using them, are they just picking through them to find the pieces that

they’re comfortable with?” Chaucer said that’s what happened at her school.

A Perfect Program?

It’s hard to find a perfect curriculum, said Blythe Wood, an instructional coach in the special education department at the Pickerington school district, and the vice president of the International Dyslexia Association of Central Ohio.

She’s critical of Leveled Literacy Intervention, specifically, for the focus it puts on looking at words as wholes, and the lack of decodable text. But there are good and bad parts to most commercial materials, she said.

“The knowledge base of the teacher, and being able to identify the needs of the student,

are more important than a boxed program,” Wood said. “We’re not going to meet every kid with one box.”

Taking a hard look at curriculum is important—but more important is making sure teachers have the training they need to evaluate practices themselves, said Beverine-Curry, of The Reading League. “Just handing teachers materials or a program or a curriculum is not going to do the job.” ■

Reminder

You can follow EdWeek’s curriculum & instruction reporter, [Sarah Schwartz](#), to receive updates. Follow her [here](#).

Published on September 25, 2020

Does Social Studies Build Stronger Readers? A New Study Suggests So

By Catherine Gewertz

A study suggests that elementary students who spend more time on social studies become better readers.

The report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute found that spending 30 minutes a day more on social studies is correlated with better reading comprehension. The study doesn’t prove that the first causes the second. But it adds to a long stream of discussion about the role that background knowledge and subject-specific vocabulary can play when children are learning to read.

The study uses a federal database that tracks 18,000 children who were kindergarten students in 2010-11 until they completed 5th grade. The Fordham researchers examined how much time students spent on various subjects, and compared it with how they performed on a reading assessment that’s given at the end of 5th grade as part of the federal study. They focused on about 6,800 students for whom they had sufficient observational details on all the indicators they were studying.

The only subject in which the study found a “clear, positive, and statistically significant effect” of more time spent on a given subject was in social studies.



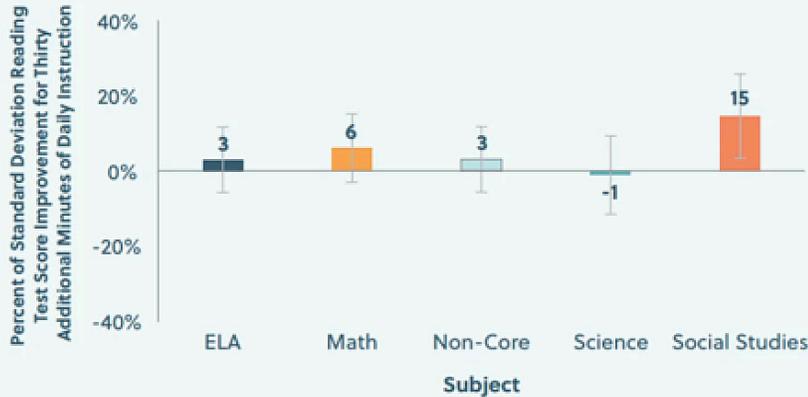
—Allison Shelley for American Education

Adam Tyner, Fordham’s associate director of research and the study’s lead author, and Sarah Kabourek, who focuses on early childhood at the research group NORC at the University of Chicago, found that elementary students spent more time on English/language arts than on any other subject: two hours a day in grades 1-5, compared with 82 minutes in math and about a half-hour each in science and social studies.

“Though many elementary schools have lengthy reading blocks, often every day, time spent on [English/language arts] is not associated with reading improvement,” the report says.

The authors found that students who spent 30 minutes more daily on social studies, however, performed better on the 5th grade reading test—by 15 percent of one standard devia-

Figure ES-2. More instructional time devoted to social studies is correlated with greater reading growth from first through fifth grade.



tion—than their peers who spent less time on that subject.

Tyner described the effect size as “modest but sustained.”

Sonia Q. Cabell studies the prevention of reading difficulties in young children as an assistant professor at Florida State University’s college of education and the Florida Center for Reading Research. She reviewed the study for Education Week. Cabell called the effect “small but meaningful.”

Even though the study could not establish that more time spent on social studies is what causes better reading performance, she said, its solid design warrants attention to—and further study of—the nature of the connection between the two.

Tyner and Kabourek controlled for kindergarten reading ability, and other factors, including race, family income, and a school’s average length of teacher tenure.

They did note, however, that the amount of classroom time spent on specific subjects “may correlate with other factors for which we are unable to control,” such as teacher quality, so “it is possible” that other things are creating the correlation between improved reading and time on spent on social studies.

Even still, Fordham’s paper said the study findings suggest that teachers reconsider how they’re using their instructional time. They argued that elementary schools should “make more room” for instruction in history, civics, geography and other areas of social studies. Fordham, which has long advocated for knowledge-building curricula, also urged schools to use their literacy blocks to build knowledge, not just teach reading skills, such as finding the main idea, in isolation.

The researchers said in the paper that they were at a loss to explain why additional time spent on science instruction showed no effect similar to the one for social studies. They theorized that the field’s vocabulary could be so specific to its discipline that it might not affect reading comprehension more broadly.

Cabell, too, was perplexed by that portion of the finding. It could be, she said, that the 5th grade tests the students took did not align well to the science they studied. Other research has found that integrating science or social studies into English/language arts instruction can have a positive effect on children’s reading comprehension, Cabell said.

As they are learning to read, young children can build knowledge of the world around them through conversations, read-alouds, and experiential learning, and most researchers agree that these activities should be key components of their early reading instruction. Research shows that young children’s ability to understand what they read depends in large part on the background knowledge and vocabulary they bring to the endeavor. They also need to be able to follow a story’s structure, and apply analytical thinking to it. ■

Additional Resources

From how-to videos to a deep-dive investigations, and reports exploring the world of English-language learners and the educators who serve them: [Summer Reading for English-Language-Learner Educators](#)



OPINION

Published on October 26, 2020

Nine Mistakes Educators Make When Teaching English-Language Learners

By Larry Ferlazzo

The new question-of-the-week is:

What are some of the most common mistakes teachers make when working with ELLs, and what should they do, instead?

Many of us who teach English-language learners make lots of mistakes in our classroom practice. This six-part series will explore what the most common mistakes teachers make with this vulnerable population and what should be done in their place.

Today’s column features responses from Marina Rodriguez, Altagracia (Grace) H. Delgado, Dr. Denita Harris, and Sarah Said.

Before we get to commentaries from today’s guests, here are my choices:

*** Confusing lack of proficiency in English with lack of intelligence.**

Our English-language learners are just as intelligent as English-proficient students. In fact, many ELLs already speak more than one language—English just happens to not be one of them. They are able to engage in higher-order and critical-thinking skills—teachers just need to know how to teach these concepts and develop these skills in accessible ways. One benefit to developing these instructional skills is that we are then able to be better teachers for all our students—good



Want to improve literacy for Emergent Bilinguals? Get them talking.

Most people understand the importance of literacy and the vital role it plays in laying the foundation for future success. But what's not as generally understood is the connection between oral language acquisition and literacy development. This connection is especially vital for Emergent Bilinguals, also known as English Learners (ELs).

Learn more in the Lexia white paper, *Let's Talk: How Oral Language Supports Literacy for Emergent Bilinguals*.



Get tips for blending reading and speaking instruction.



DOWNLOAD WHITE PAPER

ELL teaching is good teaching for everybody!

*** Looking at ELLs through the lens of deficits instead of assets.**

This mistake is, of course, connected to the first one and is not limited to ELLs since large numbers of teachers view many other students in the same way. Not only do having ELLs in our classes challenge us to be better teachers to all students, but many ELLs bring wonderful gifts such as being able to share experiences that neither we nor our other students are likely to learn about elsewhere—ranging from stories of life in another country, to incredible stories of immigration hardship and resilience, to unique stories of language and mathematics from their cultures. Having an ELL in your class is not an “inconvenience.” It’s a gift!

*** Trying to rush ELLs to be “reclassified” as English proficient to look good under the Every Student Succeeds Act.**

I have a lot of concerns about how ESSA might put pressure on quick reclassification and result in schools “gaming” the system (and, as everyone knows, schools certainly developed this kind of skill when trying to evade testing requirements during the No Child Left Behind era). In order to look “good,” I fear schools may take away needed supports from ELLs before they are ready. You can read more about these issues at The Best Resources For Learning About The Ins & Outs Of Reclassifying ELLs and at The Best Resources For Understanding The Every Student Succeeds Act.

*** The biggest mistake that many schools are making now during the pandemic is not providing extra support to ELLs.**

Many schools and districts are confusing “equality” with “equity.” They are treating all students the same. In many districts, like ours, which are teaching full-time virtually, ELLs attend the same number of classes (two and a half each week) as everyone else. If districts were serious about equity, they would, instead, be providing extra hours of online instruction to ELLs and other vulnerable student populations.

“We are living, breathing anchor charts for our ELLs”

Marina Rodriguez is a 4th grade dual-language teacher in College Station, Texas. She has taught 4th grade dual language over 14 years, leads an after-school blogging club for multilingual students, and is one of the co-authors of Two Writing Teachers. She can be reached through her website, marinarodz.com, or on Twitter @mrodz308:

Wherever there is learning, we will find

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Why not disrupt the system even more for the sake of students and try a co-teaching model?

- Sarah Said
in Education Week Teacher

mistakes. If I had a penny for every mistake I made ... well, I’d have a lot of pennies.

Over the years, I have learned to lean into mistakes, especially when writing in front of students. When modeling a fast draft, I’ll typically hear, “You forgot a word ...” or “You’re missing a comma ...” It is academic gold to have students notice my mistakes. They take note of my response and gain the opportunity to integrate the behavior into their own learning process.

Modeling for ELLs is a critical strategy and offering visual references, like anchor charts, are essential to learning. Students need to observe and experience mentors and models. What took time for me to realize was that their observations did not stop at the end of my lessons.

One of the most common mistakes we make as teachers is not realizing that we are living, breathing anchor charts for our ELLs. From the moment that we first make contact with a student, they are reading us. Whether they understand the language we speak or not, they read our facial expressions, our gestures, and the tone of our voice. They decide if we can be trusted or not, if we accept them or not. Believe it or not, our students can detect inauthentic kindness almost instantly.

The Impact of Gestures and Tone of Voice

Our gestures and tone of voice are two of the most powerful tools we have for teaching but especially for teaching ELLs. “Caring, disapproval, and indifference are all primarily conveyed by facial expression, tone of voice, and physical movements.” (van der Kolk, 2014) When we use our gestures and tone of voice to help students develop trust and safety, we make space for learning.

According to Stephen Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis, “Boredom and anxiety are affective factors that can serve as a kind of filter to block out incoming messages and prevent them from triggering acquisition.” (Free-

man, Freeman, 2014) Students under high levels of anxiety or nervousness will have trouble with input reaching the part of the brain that processes language. For some ELLs, fear or anxiety can hinder language acquisition.

We Communicate Without Words

What we say and how we say it can communicate completely different messages. ELLs naturally depend on our gestures and tone of voice to understand us. Our gestures and tone can cause a student to feel fear or shame, even exacerbate trauma. On the other hand, we can use gestures and the tone of our voice to nurture confidence, leading ELLs to truck through trial and error, as they practice acquiring language.

Helping to reduce levels of anxiety or nervousness, before learning takes place, is the simple practice of reaching the heart before the mind. We can do this by:

- smiling (authentically)
- maintaining a calm and relaxed body posture
- incorporating play and a playful tone of voice
- modeling acceptance and respect for diverse cultures and languages
- dramatically acting out classroom read-alouds—modeling appropriate intonation, emphasis, and pitch
- explicitly modeling interpersonal communicative language and formal academic language
- actively modeling being present when speaking or listening to ELLs

We are living, breathing anchor charts for our students. How we present ourselves to our students can open greater possibilities for learning. Our gestures and tone of voice are powerful teacher tools. We can reflect the joy for learning and acceptance for students without saying a word. Actively keeping a positive lens and high expectations for our ELLs can help all of our students move forward with learning.

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Background knowledge

Altagracia H. Delgado has been in education for 25 years and currently works as the Executive Director of Multilingual Services in the Aldine ISD, in Texas:

One of the most common mistakes I have found when working with teachers of ELs is the anticipation of having students with “no prior or background knowledge.” Assuming that our students are empty vessels that we are responsible for filling can cause a lack of understanding and empathy, which can harm us in the engagement of true relationships with our students.

As educators, we must remember that our students’ prior and background knowledge might be different from that being addressed in our daily lessons or those assessed in school but that our kids come to us with a plethora of experiences that round them as complex individuals.

First we must differentiate the two given terms: “prior knowledge” is defined as what students already know about the surrounding world from academic instruction and life experiences, while “background knowledge” is information that is essential to understanding a situation or problem. Background knowledge is then supplemental information that teachers can provide to create basic understanding of a concept or material to facilitate students’ comprehension of specific themes or topics in learning.

Our job then is to create webs of information that can connect students’ prior knowledge, while building and enhancing the background knowledge needed for our lessons. We can help create those webs by establishing authentic relationships with students, which allow for open communication. The more we keep the doors of communication open, the more students will share with us. By sharing

their prior knowledge, we are able to help them make connections that can enhance the background knowledge needed for a particular topic. Strategic planned lessons or activities in general topics of interest, can help lower the barriers of communication with students. For example, stories that are culturally relevant to our students’ countries of origin can serve as springboards of open conversations about culture, customs, and personal experiences. We can then help students analyze similarities and differences that can provide the background knowledge necessary to help in better understanding of the new content.

Don’t make assumptions

Dr. Denita Harris is a curriculum coordinator for the MSD of Wayne Township, in Indianapolis. She has over 20 years of experience as a teacher, assistant principal, and district-level administrator. Dr. Harris is the recipient of the 2019 INTESOL (Indiana Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages) Best of the Best in K-12 Education, and the 2017 and 2020 African American Excellence in Education Award. Find her on Twitter @HarrisLeads:

One of the most common mistakes teachers make when working with English-language learners is assuming that because students speak English relatively well that they are proficient in academic English. Another common mistake when working with English-learners is to interpret and translate all content in a student’s native language without properly assessing the student to know how proficient he or she is in their native language.

Research has shown that English-language learners acquire social language relatively quickly and are able to communicate quite effectively with their peers; however, when it

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Assuming that our students are empty vessels that we are responsible for filling can cause a lack of understanding and empathy.

- Altagracia H. Delgado
in Education Week Teacher

comes to applying academic language, specifically in the four domains of language: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, many students are still wrestling with the intricacies of the English language. When teachers make the assumption that a student’s ability to speak well socially is equivalent to a student’s ability to apply academic language through both oral and written communication, the teacher makes the mistake of no longer supporting the student in the classroom. Instead, some teachers blame the student’s lack of classroom success on the student by sharing that he or she lacks motivation or “grit,” not acknowledging that the onus is on the teacher to provide instructional support to assist the student in learning the English language and to increase his or her English-language proficiency level.

Another common mistake teachers make when working with English-language learners is to presuppose that by providing students with countless content materials in their native language, students will be able to comprehend the material. Too often, teachers are quick to request and order materials in a student’s native language with no clear plan of how they will support the student in his/her learning. Teachers should not provide students with content materials in their native language without first taking the following into consideration: the student’s level of proficiency in his or her native language, prior schooling, if the student is a newcomer, and how they will support the student in his or her native language and in learning English.

Co-Teaching

Sarah Said currently leads a multilingual learning program in an EL education school in a suburb 30 miles west of Chicago:

Do you still listen to your music on cassette tapes? I doubt it ... Why? Because the quality of your music is better on your Spotify through your iPhone XS that is blue-toothed to your surround speakers. So, if we know that there are better structures that are more “state of the art” to support our multilingual learners in the 2020s, why are we using 1980s structures and methods? I don’t understand why people think that students will increase their English-language proficiency by being pulled out of their general education classroom and being taught something else that is unrelated to what their class is learning.

As I say, you need to “preach to co-teach” and “command to co-plan.” Yes, we are in institutions where people are afraid of change. But with COVID-19, we have been through the storm of change. Why not disrupt the system even more for the sake of students and try a co-teaching model? You can make it work. It just takes a recipe of resilience, resistance, and repeating the data on why co-teaching is better for multilingual students.

Currently, the program I serve supports multilingual learners through a co-taught model. What has made us successful is the use of the EL Education K-8 ELA Curriculum resources and the embedded ELL supports provided in the resources. Utilizing suggestions for ELL supports actually catalyzes the process of co-planning and co-teaching. Also, it takes compromise and empathic dialogue between the multilingual team, special education team, and general education team to make this structure work. At times in a classroom, there can be three adults because of multiple teachers servicing different needs at the same time. This can work. But teams need to have intentional planning to help students meet their goals and potential. And yes, you can co-teach virtually with the right platforms.

This really is the beginning for creating equity within your system for multilingual learners. Teachers need to expose multilingual learners to quality text and high-level curriculum while scaffolding and supporting for students, not watering learning down with a 1980s style pullout and ELL basel that has nothing to do with what students are learning. This does not help students gain proficiency. Throw away the case tapes and recycle the Walkman, it’s the 2020s.

Thanks to Marina, Altagracia, Dr. Harris, and Sarah for their contributions! ■

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, California.



OPINION

Published April 11, 2021

How a Bathroom Log Helped One Middle School Understand Its Literacy Issues

By Seth Feldman

Reading isn’t just a set of skills. The most important factor in helping middle schoolers overcome literacy issues is creating strong relationships with students and families. As an administrator, I’m always using assistive technology to help guide curricular decisions and working to build structure so that students can access their education, but my best educators are the ones who stay laser-focused on developing meaningful relationships.

How to Support Struggling Readers in Middle School

The embarrassment of having a hard time reading can lead to evasive behavior and hopelessness. Here’s how my school steps in.

At the age of 13, around 65 percent of students who play competitive sports quit that sport and try a new sport. It’s because they stop winning or adopt some notion that they aren’t good enough. The same goes for reading. At Bay Area Technology School, we’ve found that 7th and 8th grades are

the most crucial years in terms of making sure that kids don’t feel hopeless about their reading ability.

If we can identify struggling readers and keep them motivated, we can turn them around in life-changing ways. They might not be reading Faulkner or Shakespeare, but they can read their high school textbooks and graduate from high school. The challenge for our educators is that, by 7th grade, students might be hiding their challenges behind coping mechanisms that keep them from being discovered. Here’s how we find and help our middle schoolers who have trouble with reading.

Replacing Remediation with Advancement

As a former reading teacher, I know that language matters. For example, I want to strike the term “remediation” from the dictionary of education. No student is remediated. They are not sick or broken. What we are looking to do is to advance all learners. Our middle schoolers don’t want to be called out as being unintelligent or incapable, so when they hear that they’re in reme-

diation class, they are more likely to lose hope and become withdrawn.

When I was teaching ELL students, a huge part of my job was to help kids fend off that feeling of hopelessness and stay motivated. So now as a superintendent, I ask my teachers not to talk about remediation, but instead to talk about advancing everyone toward excellence. That's something students can buy into, and if an educator commits to that cause, they can turn around struggling readers. First, though, they have to identify them.

Starting With Smart Assessments

The first and most objective question we ask is, "How well is this student doing with assignments or group projects?" For one of our main reading assessments, we use Lexplore, which has an AI eye-tracking feature that helps educators identify students' reading patterns to see if they might have dyslexia or another learning disability. It's not a diagnosis, but positive data from Lexplore is a good enough reason to recommend further academic testing to a parent.

Our most recent round of testing was in mid-February, when we found that 15 percent of participating 6th through 8th graders were reading at a low level, with 41 percent below average and 44 percent average. Rather than reflecting a COVID slide, these figures were an improvement over the results we saw in fall of 2020, when 20 percent of students were reading at a low level, and only 40 percent were at average level.

Whenever we test, if an educator notices the red flags and has reason to believe their student is struggling with reading alone, they know they can help their student in a couple of different ways, such as using devices that measure phonemic awareness or comprehension

What the Bathroom Log Really Means

Another way that educators can identify and help struggling readers is simply keeping a bathroom log. Last year, there was a 6th grade boy at my school who was always going to the bathroom, every single period. We noticed it right away and we also noticed that when he took his diagnostic examination for reading and math, he scored at a 2nd grade level.

We didn't call him out on it, but we did some heavy intervention in reading using assistive technology. As he grew from 2nd grade to 4th grade level, his bathroom visits decreased. By the end of the year, he was up to a

6th grade level and he wasn't on the bathroom logs at all, except at lunch.

Another student went to the bathroom every single day, 12 minutes into every class. That was when teachers were finished with explicit instruction and transitioning to group work. I got to know this boy, and at some point I just asked him, "Can you read?"

And he said, "No, not really. It's kind of why I go to the bathroom all the time." He absolutely, positively owned up to it, and we got him some help. He's in a special reading-advancement class of only 10 kids this year. Even though it's online, we have seen two grade levels of improvement, which is a big deal.

When we called home to tell his mother

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If you have a relationship with a student, you also build a level of trust, and that student will be less reluctant to read in front of you. No matter what subject you teach, you can act as a reading coach.”

how proud we were that he grew in reading, she cried. This was the first time from kindergarten through 8th grade that anyone ever called her to say that he could read, even just a little bit.

What We Learn From Interactive Reading

Educators can find out a lot by simply listening to a student read and then talking with them about what they've read after a page or two. When I was a teacher, I would sit with a student, ask them to close the book, then say, "You've made great progress. Can you help me recall three facts from that paragraph we just read?" That will tell you if a kid knows

only how to make "reading noises" or if they also know how to recall, retain, and process the information they've read.

Our school starts each morning with 20 minutes of interactive reading. Educators need to find time to listen to how their students read and then ask them to share what they've read afterward. A student might be able to make the noises necessary to read, but are they also able to comprehend what the text is telling them?

One schoolwide strategy we teach is called the "inside, outside, outside" method. We tell students to first look inside the word, at the prefix and suffix. Then they look outside the word, at the sentence before and the sentence afterward. If they still can't figure out what that word means, they look further outside using a thesaurus—not using a dictionary, because the thesaurus will help students learn other academic terms along the way and allow them to make academic connections to the new word they just learned.

This method isn't just for middle schoolers. I recently had a former student call me and say that, after months of studying, she was taking her MCAT and didn't recognize a word. "I started to sweat," she said, "I even started to cry a little bit. But then I looked inside the word, and I recognized one of the roots. I looked at the sentence before and the sentence after, and I knew the answer was C and that I was going to pass this test and become a doctor."

These methods not only give students a way to get unstuck, but they create the sort of bond where a student will call a teacher 10 years later.

A Laser Focus on Relationships

If you have a relationship with a student, you also build a level of trust, and that student will be less reluctant to read in front of you. No matter what subject you teach, you can act as a reading coach.

Reading isn't just a set of skills. The most important factor in helping middle schoolers overcome literacy issues is creating strong relationships with students and families. As an administrator, I'm always using assistive technology to help guide curricular decisions and working to build structure so that students can access their education, but my best educators are the ones who stay laser-focused on developing meaningful relationships. ■

Seth Feldman is the superintendent of the Bay Area Technology School in Oakland, California.

OPINION

Published on November 17, 2020

Give Students Choice When It's Time to Read

By Larry Ferlazzo



The new question of the week is:

What are ways to help students develop intrinsic motivation to read?

Laura Robb, Michele Haiken and Barbara Blackburn “wrap up” this four-part series. I’ve also included several reader comments. “Reading offers great rewards to those who embrace it”

Author, teacher, coach, and speaker, Laura Robb has worked with children and teachers for more than 40 years. At present, she works at Daniel Morgan Intermediate School in Winchester, Va., training 5th and 6th grade teachers and teaching children who read four to five years below grade level. Author of more than 30 books on literacy, Robb co-authors therobreviewblog.com with her son, Evan. In addition, Robb speaks at national and state conferences and trains teachers in schools in the U.S. Follow her on twitter @LRobbTeacher:

Adam was a student in my 6th and 8th grade English classes. An only child, his parents ran an African Safari travel business. Because they were away from home a great deal, a nanny cared for Adam who in 6th grade was a curious and high-achieving student. In 7th grade, when Adam’s grades started to drop, his parents began paying him \$20 for every A and \$10 for every B.

During the first semester of Adam’s 8th grade year, he raised the stakes for earning high grades. He told his parents that his grades would improve if they promised to take him out of school for six weeks and let him come on a safari with them. Their an-

swer was, “No!” and Adam’s grades began to plummet. When raising the dollar value for A’s and B’s didn’t work, Adam’s parents set up a conference with me. To their credit, they understood the folly of paying big bucks for Adam to achieve at school and explained how guilty they felt for being away from home during most of the school year. “Look,” I suggested. “Adam is smart. He knows the score. Level with him. Stop the grade payments and maybe plan a family vacation with him for the summer.”

Often, when adults manipulate kids to read and get high grades, it backfires. Once the points, pizza, and ice cream parties at school and payment for grades stops, quite often, so does the reading and hard work. The question to consider and reflect on is, Why read? If parents and teachers recognize that reading is not just something done at school—that it’s a lifelong experience—then, hopefully, they will stop giving extrinsic rewards!

Why Read?

Reading offers great rewards to those who embrace it. Readers can:

Travel the world and meet people and interact with characters they wouldn’t connect with in one lifetime!

- Experience the past, present, and future as well as learn about topics they’re passionate about.

- Build their bank of prior knowledge that supports reading with understanding.
- Know the pleasure and enjoyment from reading a gripping story.
- Build a large vocabulary as they meet words in diverse contexts.
- Develop their imaginations as they visualize places, characters, and people.
- Learn how different literary genres work so they can easily navigate a wide range of books.
- Deepen their understanding of the writing process as they practice reading with a “writer’s eye.”
- Refine their analytical and critical-thinking skills.
- Share and discuss beloved books with friends.
- Revisit books they enjoyed and reread all or parts, always finding something new to reflect on.

Readers develop the skill to become the problem solvers of the future because they have the capacity to concentrate, learn, think, and reflect. But here’s the elephant standing tall and large in the middle of the room:

CHOICE

Readers need and want choice for independent and instructional reading. Choice is the initial motivator, and engagement with the self-selected book often follows. Access to wonderful books creates readers, and that’s why CHOICE also extends to content subjects that have class libraries on a wide range of topics and reading levels. Intentionally carving out time to read at school every day can develop pleasure in reading among all students. When reading becomes a lifelong habit, motivation is intrinsic, and the reward is in the reading—the pleasure and enjoyment and learning.

Closing Thoughts

Several years ago, I conducted a survey among students in grades 3 to 8, asking them to respond to the question, *Why do you read?* The responses of two students still remain in my memory.

A 3rd grader wrote: *Well, I live in the country. What better thing could I do after riding my bike?*

An 8th grader wrote: *I love sitting in my room and not being there. When I'm reading, I'm in other places visiting with characters I don't meet every day. Only a book can take me everywhere.*

I rest my case.

Reading in class

Michele L. Haiken is a middle school English teacher and adjunct professor of literacy in Westchester, N.Y. She is the author of New Realms for Writing: Inspire Student Expression with Digital Age Formats (ISTE, 2019) and Personalized Reading: Digital Strategies and Tools To Support All Learners (ISTE, 2018). Find out more about her classroom strategies at her blog and connect with her on Twitter @teachingfactor:

There is nothing like a great book to engross the reader, travel to another time or place, offer a new perspective on history, provide another perspective, bring new awareness, and hold up a mirror to one's own life. As an English teacher, reading is a passion and pastime for me. But it wasn't always this way. When I was in middle and high school, I was a reluctant reader. I disliked so many of the assigned books I read in my youth. The classics and canonical texts filled the reading lists. I found myself procrastinating summer reading requirements until days before school would begin again only to be faced with more required reading of people I did not connect with.

Today, it is the complete opposite in my own classroom. Students are given choices when it comes to school reading. Whether independent reading or working through our thematic units of instruction, students have book choice, and this leads to an increased motivation to read. To help them choose a book that piques their interest, I read aloud excerpts from books, share book trailers, and play audio selections of popular and poignant books I want to share with my students with the hope to match the right book at the right time with a reader. I share with my students books I am reading, listening to, and that comprise my 'To Be Read List.' Students have time to read every day in our English classroom. My classroom library is bursting with advanced-reader copies (ARCs) I collected at conferences like NCTE, ILA, and NerdCamp. Plus I am always purchasing books on Amazon after I read a

“ Readers need and want choice for independent and instructional reading.”

- Laura Robb
in Education Week Teacher

new book review and get a recommendation from my professional learning community.

Educator and author of *BookLove* (Heinemann, 2013), Penny Kittle states that to motivate readers, students need choices, book talks, time to read in class, book clubs, access to books, and to see teachers passionate about reading. Literacy is a schoolwide initiative. When students see the adults in their life reading, talking about books, and share their reading life, they have positive reading role models. Similarly, carving out time in our classes for reading is key. When we flip reading time during class time rather than assigning reading outside of school, we allow students to practice reading in real time, promote discussion, and apply reading in the classroom. If we are going to help cultivate students who are avid readers of text—print, visual, digital, audio—then it means we are intentional about creating a culture of reading in our schools and classrooms.

Helping “students make their own connections”

Barbara Blackburn, Ph.D., is an international speaker and a Top 30 Global Guru. She has written over 25 books, specializing in rigor, motivation, and leadership. She regularly presents on-site and technology-based workshops:

Intrinsic motivation is that which comes from within a student. It is internal as opposed to external. With intrinsic motivation, students appreciate activities for the sake of those activities. They enjoy learning and the feelings of accomplishment that accompany the activity. There are many benefits to intrinsic motivation. Students tend to earn higher grades, score higher on achievement tests,

prefer challenging activities, and are more confident about their abilities.

As we create an environment to encourage students' intrinsic motivation in reading, there are two keys. Students are more motivated when they value what they are doing and when they believe they have a chance for success. Those are the two keys: value and success. Do students see value in your lesson? Do they believe they can be successful?

Students are more motivated to learn when they see the value, or the relevance, of the knowledge and skills presented to them. Students have a streaming radio station playing in their heads: WII-FM--What's In It For Me? When they are reading, students are processing information through that filter. Why do I need to learn this? Will I ever use this again?

Ideally, your students will make their own connections about the relevance of content, and you should provide them opportunities to make those connections independently. But there are also times that you will need to facilitate that understanding, whether it is finding books that match their interests or helping a high school student connect poetry with song-writing lessons.

Students can also see value in activities and in their relationship with you. When we can provide a hands-on, interactive learning experience, students are more engaged and motivated. Students also find value in their relationships. For example, if you think about your most motivated students, you likely had a good relationship with them. Conversely, with your least motivated students, there was probably not a positive connection. It takes time to build a good relationship with our students, but it is an important part of our role as a teach-

er. One of the most important things you can do is to read in front of your students and share your own reading list with them.

Second, setting up opportunities for success is critical. Students need to achieve in order to build a sense of confidence, which is the foundation for a willingness to try something else. That in turn begins a cycle that results in higher levels of success, both in academic performance and college and career readiness. Success leads to success, and the achievements of small goals or tasks are building blocks to larger ones.

Comments from readers:

Camie Lystrup Walker:

I think they need heart. Look at Harry Potter. It inspired a generation of readers by making reading cool! One avenue I am exploring is Podcasts. Wait, that's not reading, right? Research shows those who can visualize what they read are better readers. Podcasting creates equity by allowing all to benefit from the heart of reading even if decoding is difficult. Yes, decoding text is important, but it won't develop an intrinsic desire to read

like forming emotional connections will. Bring back the read-aloud!

Chris Moore:

Read. Read to them. Read in front of them. Talk about what you've read. Read near them. Have books around. Always. Ask about what they're reading. LET THEM CHOOSE. Get rid of the level stickers. Stop organizing books by level. Eliminate incentive-based reading "programs."

Roxanne Stellmacher:

Reading shifts to joy and becomes intrinsically motivating when it becomes automated and connected to highly engaging subject matter. When students either 1) struggle with learning to read (starts early and is a major predictor of long-term reading engagement) and/or 2) are not given exposure and opportunities to engage with high-interest texts, they have little motivation to do the necessary work (whether strengthening skills or increasing exposure) needed to generate self-motivated engagement.

If we can help students who are struggling readers (this means direct reading instruction—phonological awareness/phonics/decoding/word

recognition/fluency/vocabulary/comprehension) AND allow students to choose their texts (by way of book talks, peer recommendations, podcast/social-media recs, etc.), we can greatly increase the success felt with reading, and thus, generate intrinsic motivation to continue it.

Thanks to Laura, Michele, and Barbara, and to readers, for their contributions! ■

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, California.

Additional resources

This is the final post in a four-part series.

- Part One: ['Allow Time for Children to Read Whatever They Want'](#)
- Part Two: [22 Strategies for Encouraging Students' Intrinsic Motivation to Read](#)
- Part Three: [Encourage Students 'to See Reading as a Relational Experience'](#)

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