EDITOR’S NOTE
While equity in literacy education has progressed, hurdles remain. This Spotlight will help with strategies for diversity and inclusion; research on white characters in kids’ books and school texts; communication with parents of students with learning differences; ways to support older, lagging readers; how to support struggling readers with shame; practices for building literacy in older English-learners; and why literacy should be accessible, individualized, and inclusive.

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Equity in Literacy Education
How Schools Can Support Older Students Who Lag in Reading

By Sarah Schwartz

At the beginning of 2020, Shelly Emann felt like her district was on the right track with reading instruction.

In the Madison public schools in New Jersey, where Emann works as a K-8 instructional coach, teachers in kindergarten and 1st grade had just started using a program that taught students the building blocks of reading in a systematic progression: how to identify the different words in sounds, how to match those sounds to letters, and how to use that knowledge to decode new words.

Emann hoped that this new system would head off some of the reading difficulties she had seen in her nearly two decades as a 4th grade teacher, working with many students who didn’t know how to read through harder words with multiple syllables.

But then, COVID-19 hit. “That threw us for a loop,” Emann said.

Getting wiggly 5- and 6-year-olds to sit through phonics lessons on Zoom that spring was a losing battle. And then last school year, pandemic-adjusted schedules didn’t always leave enough time for K-2 teachers to pull together small groups of students for additional support. This year, the district is expanding the new reading program to 3rd grade, too, but supply-chain issues delayed the delivery of materials for the first few months of the school year.

Madison is far from unique. Over the past two years, many students across the country spent less face-to-face time with their teachers during a critical period of their reading development: the first few years of elementary school, in which students learn how to read words.

National studies of student-test scores during the 2020-21 year found that these students weren’t doing as well as their peers in years past. And now, some teachers and reading specialists say that they’re seeing more 4th, 5th, and 6th graders with reading difficulties than they used to.

Still, Emann feels good about the progress Madison is making. The elementary principals have worked together to create an intervention block for all kids in grades K-5, and the district has hired additional reading interventionists.

Just as importantly, she feels like the pandemic has finally amplified the message she’s tried to convey to her colleagues for years: Many older students in grades 4 and up have gaps in their foundational reading skills, too—and that limits their ability to access grade-level work.

Now, the teachers she works with want to talk more about finding and fixing foundational skills gaps, because they’re trying to address learning loss, Emann said.

The pandemic has intensified some students’ reading difficulties

Older students struggling with reading is not a phenomenon new to the pandemic. In 2019, before COVID disrupted schools, scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that only 66 percent of 4th graders and 73 percent of 8th graders were at or above a “basic” level of proficiency in the subject.

But the turmoil over the past two years has resurfaced questions about exactly how best to get students up to speed, and it’s directed funding toward academic recovery. The pandemic also hit at a pivotal time for reading instruction: When the virus started to shut down schools in the spring of 2020, many states and districts were in the middle of a years-long push to align early-reading classes more closely to research-based practice.

Reading well is a complex process, involving lots of different skills like recognizing and understanding vocabulary or monitoring comprehension. But the building blocks of reading ability, the foundational skills, involve decoding the printed letters on the page into spoken words. If students can’t read words and fluently connect them into sentences, they won’t be able to understand what they’re reading.

Decades of studies have shown that explicitly and systematically teaching students which sounds represent which letters—teaching them phonics—is the most effective way to get them reading words. This happens in students’ first years of school, usually kindergarten through 2nd or 3rd grade. But as reporting from Education Week and other outlets has demonstrated, many elementary-teacher-preparation programs don’t teach their students how to deliver that kind of instruction.

As a result, teachers say, some students move on to higher grade levels with gaps in their ability to read words. Research bears this out: Many older students who have comprehension difficulties also struggle with word-level reading.

This reality flies in the face of the maxim that students “learn to read” in K-3 and then switch to “read to learn” in older grades. In fact, as this research demonstrates, the issue is less clear-cut. Students who didn’t get enough practice with word-level reading will continue to struggle as the demands of content knowledge and comprehension ramp up.

The pandemic has only compounded this.
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issue, widening the gaps between students who can read fluently and students who can’t,” said Tiffany Hogan, a professor at the MGH Institute of Health Professions in Boston and the director of the institute’s Speech and Language Literacy Lab.

“Teachers are having to differentiate instruction in a way that they never have before. It’s a really Herculean task,” she said.

**What foundational-skills gaps look like in older readers**

Foundational-skills gaps can show up differently for older students from how they do for younger ones, said Jeanne Wanzek, a professor of special education at Vanderbilt University. “Maybe they don’t have gaps in phonics and word recognition that might be more common in K-2, but they struggle with reading multisyllabic words and they don’t really have a strategy for that,” she said.

That is the case for Jenna Madden’s 3rd graders.

“Most of my students are able to decode a one-syllable word, but they have trouble with the 2nd grade material, where they have to decode multisyllable words,” said Madden, who teaches in Emann’s district in New Jersey. “And now in 3rd grade, we’re seeing not only two-syllable words but words with three or four syllables in grade-level text.”

It’s also likely that students will have mastered some parts of the K-2 curriculum but not others. “There’s often splintered skills,” Wanzek said. “It’s just more complex, in terms of where their strengths are.”

Struggles with word reading and comprehension feed into each other, she added: Students who skip a lot of words because they can’t decode them will have a harder time understanding the text, applying comprehension strategies, and storing new knowledge. As students progress through the grades and must read more academic texts, they have to rely on more background knowledge and vocabulary—information they may not have, Wanzek said, if they had trouble reading related content in earlier grades.

“If you’re struggling at 4th or 5th grade or higher, it’s not going to be as simple as if you’re in kindergarten,” Wanzek said. “Often, it’s multiple components that need to be addressed, and we see in the older grades that these multi-component interventions have higher effects.”

Older students with word-reading difficulties do need support for those skills, Wanzek said. But reviews of research on upper-grades interventions also find that explicit-vocabulary and comprehension-strategy instruction can improve students’ reading ability. For example, teachers can show students how to paraphrase what they’ve read or draw inferences based on information in the text and prior knowledge.

Madden, the 3rd grade teacher, makes it a priority to teach students grade-level skills and content, even as she also attends to the building blocks of reading.

“Even though I have students who are reading below grade level, it’s still important to expose them to grade-level text,” she said.

**How to address foundational skills without neglecting grade-level work**

How schools address older students’ word-reading difficulties depends on what skills children already have.

For students who have some phonics skills and can decode short words, one research-based recommendation is word study. This involves teaching students how to identify different syllables within words and how to read through multisyllabic words, but it also includes morphology: the study of the smallest units of meaning within words.

Morphology instruction teaches how to break up words like “untouchable” into parts: the prefix “un-,” the root “touch,” and the suffix “-able.” And it teaches the meaning of those parts, which research has shown can support vocabulary development.

For students who need support in reading fluency, researchers recommend having students read passages aloud, with monitoring and feedback from a teacher.

This kind of supplemental instruction can be done in a separate intervention block. But it isn’t always necessary to break out these skills from whole-class teaching, Wanzek said. “The good news is that we actually do know from previous research that you can make incredible gains in reading with older grades—as well as younger grades—by focusing on classroom instruction.”

That is the approach that Bayside Middle School in Virginia Beach, Va., is taking. The school has woven morphology and fluency instruction into whole-class lessons, said Rene Martinez, the 6th grade literacy coach at Bayside.

Students who need more support than what’s offered in core classes spend additional time working with reading specialists on a digital supplemental program that addresses foundational skills. And students who struggle with decoding one-syllable words or letter recognition get time in small groups with reading specialists and interventionists.

Many students struggled with grade-level work before the pandemic, and the shift in practice in the district isn’t a response to COVID alone, Martinez said. But the disruptions of the past few years have exacerbated students’ needs, she added.

During the 2020-21 school year, Martinez started working with the district’s high school elementary language-arts coordinators to figure out how the school could fill in foundational-skills gaps while still keeping middle schoolers on track to tackle high-school-level work. Together, they adapted a 6th grade curriculum to maintain focus on essential grade-level skills and content, while also allowing time for core instruction in morphology and fluency. This is the first year teachers are working with the new program.

Lorraine Hajjar-Conant, who teaches 6th grade English/language arts at Bayside, didn’t think students would like much of the small-group work, with its focus on reading aloud and breaking down words into parts. But so far, kids look forward to it, asking her in the mornings whether they’ll get to do it that day. She’s seen some improvements in students’ comfort with reading aloud, too.

Even so, it’s a tricky balancing act to make time for fluency and word work while also teaching 6th grade skills, like identifying the causes and effects of events in informational texts, Hajjar-Conant said. Teachers try to integrate the two as much as possible—for example, asking questions about plot, characters, and theme while students are reading fiction for fluency practice, she said.

“I think it’s great that we’re trying some-
thing different to see if we’re going to get a positive outcome,” Hajjar-Conant said. She’s looking forward to next year, when the school will have data on whether these changes helped set students up for more success in 7th grade.

Experts anticipate a ‘protracted period of catch-up’

Even though these foundational gaps can underpin reading difficulties, there are barriers to addressing them in older grades.

“It was something that was completely new to all of us, because we’re not from an elementary background,” said Hajjar-Conant. The school has started work this year to address students’ foundational-skills gaps, both in whole-group instruction and intervention.

“It was a lot of new vocabulary and a new way of learning information. It was definitely a struggle,” Hajjar-Conant said, of the learning process for her and her fellow teachers.

Teachers in older grades may have to put in more legwork to use assessments that can diagnose foundational-skills gaps and materials that can support instruction in that area, Wanzek said. Most of the screeners and diagnostic tests that can identify word-reading issues are the domain of special education teachers, and they’re not generally used in older-elementary general education, she added.

It can also be harder to find age-appropriate materials, said Hailey Love, an assistant professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. “Often when children are perceived as being behind, they’re subject to practices that are actually found to decrease motivation.”

Teachers might have students only read texts at their “level,” which would be written for younger children. It’s important that students still get to engage with grade-level material and that they have the same choice in reading materials that other kids have, Love said.

And then, there’s the shift in mindset. Middle school teachers are used to spending their time teaching to middle school standards, not how to sound out words, Hajjar-Conant said.

“The way that our administrators are trying to put it is, it’s not something additional. We need these kids to read at a 6th grade level, so if we have to go back to 3rd grade skills, that’s what we’re going to do,” she said. “We’re going to have time to address the standards, but we need to teach them how to read.”

Martinez, the literacy coach, acknowledges that change is a long process. Asking teachers to try new instructional methods poses an extra hurdle to jump in a year already fraught with COVID-related challenges.

“Schools are just humans, put together. And humans have limitations,” said Hogan of the Speech and Language Literacy Lab. Her team works with school partners, and many of their literacy initiatives were “rocked by COVID,” she said. In some of these schools, teachers are also trying to support students through the traumas they’ve experienced over the past few years, like losing parents to the virus.

For Hogan, the answer isn’t to abandon efforts but to acknowledge that they might take a more circuitous route than expected. “I think that what needs to be kept in mind,” she said, “is that there’s going to be a more protracted period of catch-up than we anticipated.”

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What Teachers Can Do to Help Struggling Readers Who Feel Ashamed

By Madeline Will

For the millions of students who struggle to read at grade level, every school day can bring feelings of anxiety, frustration, and shame.

That’s why it’s critical to support students’ social-emotional needs alongside their reading instruction, experts say, especially in later years. After 3rd grade, students are expected to switch from learning to read to reading to learn. But if students haven’t mastered the foundational reading skills at that point, they may never become strong readers. They may disengage from school as the years go on, and many—especially students from low-income families—will not graduate.

“By the time kids hit 3rd or 4th grade, if they’re still having a tough time [with reading], they view it as a failing on their part,” said Elizabeth Jaeger, an associate professor in the University of Arizona College of Education. “Reading is such a core part of being successful in school, and they see themselves as not being able to do that. … All these other kids just like me are doing just fine, and I can’t seem to get it together.” That’s just a really heavy burden, I think, for a lot of kids and that’s the heart of their vulnerability.”

School can be a minefield for those students, particularly as they reach middle and high school. Reading is woven throughout every subject area, meaning that children who don’t receive appropriate support can fall behind in multiple classes, even though they are capable of intellectually understanding the material. Teachers may call on students to read aloud in front of the entire class, opening them up to potential judgment or snickers from their peers. And sometimes, students who lack decoding skills are given early-reader texts to practice, which feel babyish and boring.

Often, students who are not progressing at the same rate as their peers are ashamed and try to hide their lagging reading skills,
said Ann Monroe, the assistant dean of the University of Mississippi School of Education who studies shame in the classroom. That desire to hide can manifest itself in four ways, as defined in psychiatrist Donald Nathanson’s model of the Compass of Shame:

• **Attack self.** This can range from verbal self-put-downs ("I’m so stupid") to self-harm.

• **Attack others.** A student may lash out at a teacher or classmate who exposes their weakness in reading.

• **Withdrawal.** A student who is ashamed of their reading abilities may avoid participating in class or stop showing up altogether.

• **Avoidance.** A student may try to deflect attention by exhibiting disruptive behaviors, such as being the class clown or acting out.

“It’s a rare occasion for a kid ... who knows they’re struggling to be willing to be brave enough to ask for help,” said Jeanne Schopf, a middle school reading specialist, interventionist, and coach in Sturgeon Bay, Wis.

**Many students don’t master foundational skills in early grades**

Research shows that systematic, explicit phonics instruction is the most reliable way to make sure that children learn how to read words. Yet many elementary teachers aren’t trained in this type of instruction, so students are often taught to identify a word by guessing with the help of context clues. They might learn some letter-sound patterns but not others. They can’t reliably decode words but may be able to mask their reading difficulties if they understand the meaning of the story and can predict words that make sense and look right on the page.

The opposite is also true: Some students may be able to decode, but they don’t have a deep enough understanding of oral language to make meaning of the words they are saying.

Often, children who can’t reliably decode words continue to advance through school at a substandard level without receiving any evidence-based instruction, said Sarah Part, a policy analyst at the nonprofit Advocates for Children of New York, which offers legal and advocacy support for students from low-income backgrounds in New York City who are struggling in school.

“The problem just gets worse and worse and worse over the years, and the student gets increasingly frustrated and falls further and further behind,” she said. “They’re students who could have learned to read, no question, had they gotten the type of instruction they needed.”

Small deficits students may have in reading compound over time—a phenomenon known as the Matthew Effect in Reading, after the Bible verse in which the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. A student who struggles with decoding can’t access the information in grade-level texts, unless teachers provide other avenues. If they can’t access the information, they can’t use it to make sense of future texts, and their comprehension and background knowledge suffers.

By the time students who struggle to read get to middle or high school, many of them have been in ineffective reading-intervention programs for years, experts say. They may develop low self-esteem or anxiety, and many are angry, both at themselves and at educators who have not been able to teach them to read.

“They’ve really internalized these messages that school isn’t a place for them, that they’re not smart, and that reading isn’t an enjoyable activity,” Part said.

Sometimes, these students disengage or act out so frequently that teachers assume they’re not applying themselves or don’t care about school. But in reality, Part said, “it’s all stemming from the fact that it’s really frustrating and humiliating to be older and not be able to read.”

**Teachers can help mitigate feelings of shame**

Teachers can support students’ social-emotional needs by maximizing their positive feelings, minimizing negative ones, and creating a culture where students feel comfortable talking about their emotions surrounding reading, Monroe said.

To start, teachers must create a classroom environment where students feel comfortable asking for help and making mistakes in public without fear of mockery. Meg Tegerdine, a 5th and 6th grade special education teacher in Florissant, Mo., said her students often feel like educators in their past have given up on them. It takes time for them to get to a place where they feel comfortable being vulnerable.

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**Do’s and Don’ts for Supporting Students Who Are Reading Below Grade Level**

Older students who have not mastered reading are at risk for disengaging from school. Here are some expert-recommended do’s and don’ts for teachers:

- Do build a supportive classroom environment where students feel empowered to be vulnerable and make mistakes.

- Don’t force students to read aloud in front of their peers.

- Do offer scaffolding and supports so that students can access grade-level content even if they are not reading at grade level.

- Don’t always group students who are reading below grade level together. Instead, utilize flexible grouping that are sometimes homogenous and sometimes heterogeneous.

- Do give struggling readers books that are interesting and age-appropriate while still being accessible in terms of reading level.

- Don’t assume that a student who is refusing to engage in classwork is lazy or doesn’t care about school. Embarrassment and shame might be at the root of their behavior issues.

- Do incorporate students’ strengths and interests into reading instruction.

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**Equity in Literacy Education**
and taking risks in reading, she said.

“Nothing works if you don’t have relationships” with students, she said. “I try really hard every year to let them know … they’re worth fighting for and I’m going to be the one fighting for them.”

But pedagogical strategies like “popcorn reading,” in which students are randomly called on to read aloud for a short period of time, can cause anxiety for students who are below grade level in reading, educators say. “That is a really easy way for a kid to feel discouraged or put on the spot,” Tegerdine said.

Instead, teachers could use strategies like “choral reading,” in which the entire class reads aloud in unison, or private read-alouds, in which a student reads directly to the teacher, to build fluency and oral-language skills, Monroe said.

Teachers should also carefully consider how often they’re grouping students of similar reading skills together, because that can stigmatize struggling readers, Monroe said. While ability-based reading groups are meant to target instruction to students’ learning needs, research shows that students in lower-level reading groups are slow to progress academically and less likely to move up to higher-level reading groups in later grades.

“A lot of times, students get stuck in groups,” Monroe said. “They notice it, and this can create a feeling of shame.”

She recommends teachers use flexible grouping, a strategy that puts students in different reading groups depending on the day and the lesson. Sometimes, the groups may be homogeneous in terms of reading skills, while other groups might consist of students of varied abilities.

Also, it’s important to capitalize on the strengths students already have. For example, Monroe said she worked with a high school teacher who had many students reading below grade level. However, the students were artistic and enjoyed illustrating comic books—so the teacher encouraged them to add more text into their comic books and then swap their books with peers to read.

“When you’re doing something you’re good at, you’re much more motivated,” Monroe said. And “when kids are motivated, they tend to do better.”

Experts say older students who are reading below grade level should have access to age-appropriate texts that are engaging while still being accessible. High/low books—short for high interest, low reading level—can help build fluency and vocabulary skills while also maintaining interest in reading.

Nonfiction texts often strike a good balance between having sophisticated content and relatively simple sentences, the University of Arizona’s Jaeger said. And Tegerdine said she uses a lot of comic books and graphic novels with her students, since the subject areas are usually more mature, but there’s less text.

Schopf, the middle school reading interventionist in Wisconsin, said she gives students who are reading below grade level the same books as their classmates as long as there is additional support. For example, students can listen to an audiobook, which will help them develop more vocabulary and meet certain grade-level standards, such as identifying the theme or the main character. (Students will also meet with Schopf for explicit phonics instruction.)

But often, middle and high schools don’t provide students who are below grade level in reading with the assistive technology they need, said Part of the Advocates for Children of New York.

“Not being able to read at grade level should not be a barrier to getting other grade-level academic content,” she said. “That’s what’s going to help students engage in school.”

After all, by middle school, students who struggle with reading have often experienced what could be considered trauma, educators said.

“It’s very important—in addition to getting students evidence-based instruction—to validate their past experiences,” Part said. “They’ve been struggling for a long time, and no one has helped them. It’s not their fault: The school system failed them.”

**Teachers should meet students where they are**

**Engagement is paramount**

Teachers already know how crucial it is—and how challenging it can be—to get students engaged in their work. But engagement is even more important for adolescents, since they’re at a delicate crossroads: Exploring their identities and the social world around them, they’re more likely to feel their schoolwork is boring and irrelevant. And that’s happening just as the texts they must read are more complex.

“These are young adults. It can’t be just kids lined up in rows with teachers lecturing,” said Lydia Acosta Stephens, who oversees multilingual and multicultural instruction in the Los Angeles Unified school district. “There has to
be conversation, dialogue, discussion.”

Combine the needs of adolescents with the challenge of learning English, and it becomes even more important to find ways to grab and hold students’ attention, experts say.

“Learning another language can be exhausting. Kids are doing double the work: content and language,” said Steven Weiss, a coach at Stanford University’s Center to Support Excellence in Teaching, which helps schools support their multilingual students. “If the cognitive load is that high, and you don’t make it enticing, they’ll check out.”

David Francis, a University of Houston professor who’s leading one of two federally funded teams that are researching instructional strategies for adolescent English-learners, said it’s crucial to choose topics that appeal to middle and high school students, such as relationships, health, climate change, and immigration.

Using an instructional approach that features a lot of small-group discussion also boosts the chances that students will be actively engaged while they build content knowledge and literacy skills, he said.

‘Charming’ and ‘enticing’ students

Aída Walqui, a senior research scientist at WestEd who’s leading the other federally funded research team, offers an example of a set of language arts lessons she and her colleagues developed to use with 8th grade Los Angeles students. They were built on the idea of “charming” students with a topic—and discussion techniques—that are highly relevant and engaging, she said. With strategically embedded supports, students will learn content while developing the full suite of literacy skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

In a series of lessons that spans several weeks, students explore the history of murals, study the Mexican muralist movement, and focus deeply on a mural by famed painter Diego Rivera. They expand their focus to murals in their own neighborhoods and to street art such as graffiti. Students discuss the pieces with partners or in small groups, considering questions such as how public art expresses people’s concerns.

Walqui said: It builds students’ conceptual understanding at the same time it develops their analytical processes and literacy skills. And it grounds the instruction in something adolescent English-learners can identify with, she said.

“Students have to recognize themselves in what they’re doing,” she said. “And then, based on those deep experiences, you invite them further into the unknown.”

Assure access to grade-level content and texts

Teachers can support the literacy development of all adolescent students—including English-learners—by infusing it into content-area instruction, experts say.

“There is no language without content,” Francis said. “They’re inseparable.”

Building background knowledge, too, is known to be pivotal to strong reading skills.

To build both the background knowledge and literacy skills they need, English-learners must have consistent access to grade-level content and texts, experts say. Teachers can use a range of strategies to do that, such as breaking down a text into essential ideas, Francis said.

Visual supports are particularly important to help English-learners understand what they’re reading, so experts suggest that teachers make use of illustrations, graphic organizers, and multimedia. Language supports, such as glossaries, can aid understanding as well.

Paul Hernandez, a social studies teacher in Sanger Unified, a district in California’s Central Valley that has drawn notice for its work with English-learners, uses a graphic organizer called the Frayer model to help his 11th graders—a blend of native-English speakers and English-learners—explore the meanings of words they encounter.

He blends speaking, writing, and reading strategies to help students build their language muscles. In a recent unit on U.S. migration patterns of the 1920s, students read paragraphs aloud, highlighting important ideas and putting question marks next to unknown words or concepts. Those exercises help students participate in class and group discussion. And Hernandez finds that they help his...
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For Equitable Learning, Structured Literacy Instruction Is a Must. So, What Are Its Components?

You know that Structured Literacy is the science-based way to teach all students how to read. But what does that look like?

In 1986, Philip Gough and William Turner developed a framework for understanding Structured Literacy instruction, called the Simple View of Reading. It explains that reading comprehension is the product of decoding, or word recognition, and language comprehension. Structured Literacy instruction must include both. Here's a snapshot.

The Components of Structured Literacy

**Decoding**
The reader's linkage of the printed words on page to their spoken equivalents.
- Phonology
- Morphology
- Orthography

**Language Comprehension**
The reader's ability to construct meaning from spoken language.
- Syntax
- Pragmatics
- Semantics
- Discourse

In 2001, Hollis Scarborough expanded on the Simple View of Reading with the “Reading Rope,” which explains how decoding and language comprehension subskills combine to develop reading skills.

By implementing these components in the classroom, educators can help ensure more equitable literacy instruction, as all students receive what’s needed for reading and academic success.

Want to dive deeper? Review classroom applications for each component of Structured Literacy—from morphology to discourse—in the Lexia® Education Insight, *Structured Literacy: Applying the Science of Reading in the Classroom.*
How Should Structured Literacy Be Taught?

Once you know the what of Structured Literacy instruction—including decoding and language comprehension—it’s also important to understand the how.

So, here’s how to bring this equitable, proven method into the curriculum:

**Explicitly**
Don’t assume students will implicitly learn. Concepts and skills should be directly taught and practiced.

**Systematically**
When presenting concepts and skills, they should be logically ordered, progressing from simple to complex.

**Cumulatively**
As concepts and skills are taught and practiced, students’ knowledge increases through the introduction of more complex concepts and skills.

**Diagnostically / Responsively**
Design instruction based on students’ needs and strengths, and monitor students’ progress, making adjustments as needed.

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Building access points to complex material

Diane August, a longtime researcher and adviser on English-learners, suggests a range of scaffolding strategies to help students access text and build literacy skills. Teachers could put students in pairs or groups, blending native speakers with those still learning English if possible, and they could read small chunks of text together. Each group could be assigned to gather information needed for a whole-class discussion. This kind of approach can help both English-learners and native speakers build literacy skills, August said.

August also suggests teaching a set of academic vocabulary words intensively over several days. In a science lesson being developed for the University of Houston-led grant, 7th graders explore how animals adapt to their surroundings. The lesson focuses on a chunk of informational text and provides the definition of “adapt” in English and Spanish, with picture cards to reinforce the ideas, including one of a lizard changing color to match a tree. It invites students to talk with a partner about how they’d adapt to cold weather and uses multiple modalities, including a video about a flamingo’s habitat, stopping at key points to dive deeper. Words like “optimal” and “predators” are explained in glossaries in the margins.

Teachers working on that lesson will use three levels of scaffolding: For students least proficient in English, they’ll supply “response frames,” or paragraphs in which students fill in specific words. For those with intermediate proficiency, teachers will offer only “sentence starters,” such as, “There are few predators because ...” For those most proficient, and native-English speakers, teachers will pose questions without either of those supports.

Ground practice on detailed, individual knowledge of students

Experts advise teachers to make use of the rich data set available on their English-learners. Annual proficiency-test results, periodic screenings, and formative-assessment strategies all can yield important clues to what kinds of support students need. Many teachers don’t look at these data or even know which of their students are English-learners, August said.

Acosta Stephens of Los Angeles Unified urged teachers to immerse themselves in the language-proficiency data about their students and to spend time talking with them and jotting notes about their language skills. Viewing students’ native languages as an asset, too, is crucial.

“All these things can be used to determine not just where a student is weak but where they are strong,” Stephens said.

It’s a point echoed by many experts: Teachers must view students’ home languages as strengths rather than obstacles, and they must work to support those native languages even as they’re building skills in English. It’s important to understand students’ levels of literacy in their original languages, since those foundations are building blocks for learning a new language.

As a 2017 national report on English-learners points out, students already carry the “underlying neural architecture” of language, and many skills transfer as they learn English. Speakers of Romance languages, for instance, can draw on the many cognates—words with similar derivations and sounds—shared by their native and new languages.

Systemwide policies and concepts are needed for effective literacy instruction

To be successful, the teaching of literacy skills in English-learners needs a suite of its own supports: high-quality training and professional development to equip teachers with the right skills; a coherent, districtwide vision of the beliefs that undergird instruction; and what that instruction should look like, experts say.

“Too often, teachers are told to focus on the pieces,” said Weiss of Stanford. “It’s ‘focus on grammar!’ or ‘focus on vocabulary, oral language!’ It ends up being a Christmas tree approach to learning, with shiny baubles but no coherence. Teachers need real clarity at the district level: What should instruction look like for our ELLs? What do we mean by scaffolding? What do we mean by academic discourse? What does that look like in a classroom, and what implications does it have for curriculum?”

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic gives districts a unique chance to rebuild their approach to English-learners, Weiss said.

“Let’s not go back to normal,” he said. “Let’s rethink it, build a systematic approach to provide the supports ELLs need, and build on the assets they bring.”

6 Ways to Communicate Better With Parents of Students With Learning Differences

For students who learn or think differently, a strong network of support is key. That network includes two critical players: teachers and parents. During the pandemic, it’s been harder than ever to bridge the communication gap between families and schools, especially during remote learning.

How can these two groups develop better strategies and avenues for effective communication? That’s the central question we invited our Twitter followers to answer during a Twitter chat last month. We tapped Michelle Lassiter, an Editorial Research and Expert Relations Associate for Understood, a nonprofit that is dedicated to helping those who learn and think differently, to co-host the online discussion and provide her expert insights and resources.

Parents and educators joined together, sharing what they saw as some of the biggest obstacles to facilitating these discussions and presented some solutions. Teachers cited their struggles getting parents involved in the learning process for their kids, while parents shared their confusion over when to initiate these conversations and their fear of being judged as a parent.

When it comes to teaching students with learning differences, everyone’s experience is unique. But there are some tips that can help...
both parents and educators come together to advocate for these students.

Here are 6 key lessons learned about facilitating better communication, as told by the chat participants:

1. Treat parents as partners in the process.
   “Be intentional about inviting parents to communicate and play an active role in a child’s education. This helps increase parents’ involvement and confidence in the process.”
   - Michelle Lassiter

2. Focus on what the student has been doing well.
   Highlighting the progress a student has been making before diving into their problem areas is a great way to show parents that you’re invested in their child’s academic growth, experts said.
   “Start with strengths.”
   - Tracy Mayhue

3. Authenticity matters.
   “Be genuine. If you’re a teacher, allow parents to get to know you. If you’re a parent, bring your true self to the table. If we want to communicate with one another, we need to show each other who we are and make each other feel comfortable.”
   - Michelle Lassiter

4. Learn from each other and play into your strengths.
   “There has to be a lot of patience on both sides. A parent should learn from an experienced teacher, and a teacher from a parent who knows their child best. The door should be opened for the student.”
   - Olivera Stanković

5. Be flexible and adapt to meet each student where they are.
   Communication styles and methods can differ between families. Some might respond well to email, while others might prefer phone calls or text instead. Adjust your approach to best fit each family’s needs.
   “We have to find a way for parents to engage in those conversations in their ways, not ours.”
   - Carmen Kenton

6. Share examples from your own life to connect.
   “I always give an example from my life. I insert a short anecdote with my children so that the parent can see that I am also an ordinary person, that I also have a problem, that not everything is very easy for me in life.”
   - Olivera Stanković

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White Characters Still Dominate Kids’ Books And School Texts, Report Finds

By Sarah Schwartz

Educational materials don’t reflect the diversity of the nation’s schoolchildren, a new report finds—and many works that do feature characters of color reinforce stereotypes.

The research review, published by New America, a left-of-center think tank, analyzed more than 160 studies and published works on representation in children’s books, textbooks, and other media dating from the mid-20th century through the present. The report draws on quantitative and qualitative studies, dissertations, institutional reports, and books.

“Over time, what the research shows is that we’ve made progress as far as having more gender-balanced representation, though ... that gender representation tends to be from a binary perspective,” said Amanda LaTasha Armstrong, a research fellow in New America’s Education Policy Program, and the author of the report. “We’re also having more representation from communities of different racial and ethnic groups, but there’s still a very clear disparity.”

This review comes at a time when there’s increased national attention on what children are reading in school. Over the last year and a half, conversations about race and gender in assigned readings, library books, and textbooks have loomed large in classrooms and school board meetings across the country.

After the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, the ensuing protests for racial justice prompted some teachers and school systems to rethink the make-up of their classroom libraries and syllabi, including by adding more books by and about Black Americans and
people of color. Other schools had already taken on this work of diversifying reading lists in years past.

But in recent months, parents and school board members in some communities have mobilized in attempts to ban books that address race and gender, claiming that these books are divisive or sexually explicit. Titles such as *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, and *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel have all faced recent challenges.

A slew of state laws restricting how teachers can discuss racism and sexism in the classroom have also affected schoolbooks. In Tennessee, for instance, the legislature passed a law that prohibits teachers from saying that any individual is inherently racist due to their race, or that individuals are responsible for actions taken by members of their race in the past. In one district there, parents challenged an autobiography of Ruby Bridges on the grounds that it violated the state’s law by teaching that “white people are bad” and “America is unjust.”

But Armstrong said that featuring books that represent a diversity of experiences and backgrounds is about supporting students, and that it’s crucial for creating strong learning environments. The report notes research that has shown that books and stories that represent students’ identities and experiences can foster student engagement in their own learning.

“It’s really about having a fair representation, or authentic representation, of American society, American people,” she said.

**White, male characters still dominate children’s media**

Over the past decades, children’s media has changed, Armstrong said: More races and ethnicities are represented in children’s books now, and male/female gender representation has moved closer to equal.

Even so, the review found that white characters still dominate children’s media. This holds true within picture books and children’s literature, but also within many school textbooks. Characters of color are underrepresented compared to the demographics of U.S. youth (a little more than half of all schoolchildren in the country are children of color).

Female characters are also underrepresented, though there has been an uptick over time. Still, girls of color may be left out: One cited 2020 study of books that won the Newbery Medal, an award for children’s literature, found that only 20 percent of Black characters and 25 percent of Asian American characters were female.

There is less research on transgender representation in books, though the report cites one study on books with LGBTQ themes that found 14 percent of primary characters and 21 percent of secondary characters were transgender.

It’s hard to know how these disparities translate to U.S. classrooms—are the racial and gender breakdowns in children’s media as a whole reflected in curricula and classroom libraries?

A separate study suggests that classroom libraries, at least, have become more diverse over the past year.

A forthcoming paper in Management Science from researchers at Carnegie Mellon University looked at requests for classroom books on the crowdfunding site DonorsChoose.org in the immediate aftermath of George Floyd’s death. The study found a sharp uptick in requests for books by and about Black Americans, but also in requests for books about Latinos, Asians, Muslims, and Jews.

More than 90 percent of these projects were fully funded, translating to $3.4 million spent on books that reached more than a half-million students.

**Some books present multifaceted portrayals of characters of color; others, stereotypes**

When people of color and women are present in children’s media, how they’re portrayed varies widely, the New America report finds.

*History textbooks don’t often cover Black Americans’ resistance to race-based oppression, outside of the context of the Civil Rights movement. Textbooks also portray attacks on Black people “as if they are isolated events.” In descriptions of the colonial period, Native Americans are often shown as racially inferior to white colonists. Other racial groups are mostly missing from U.S. history textbooks—one study found that Latinos are generally only referenced in relation to immigration and labor movements, for example.*

*Children’s books show a different picture. Surveys looking at these books have found many examples of multifaceted, positive, and affirming depictions of people of color: books about family and community life, books that accurately portray lesser-known historical events, books that feature characters with a variety of experiences and perspectives.*

*Some of these trends are the result of relatively recent changes; for example, a 2018 study found that fewer books depict Asian Americans as “foreigners” than in years past. Other studies found that books about characters who shared the same racial or ethnic identity as the author—often called “own voices” stories—presented more positive portrayals.*

*But books with stereotypes still abound. In stories about Native Americans, Native peoples are often described as aggressive, and traditions from different tribal groups are often mixed together. Some books about Asian Americans uphold the “model minority” stereotype. Stories about Native Hawaiians often exoticize their culture.*

*Portrayals are also often one-dimensional. A 2018 study from researchers at Bates College in Maine found that races and ethnicities were slotted into different themes in children’s books. For example, most books about experiences of oppression featured Black characters. And while a lot of books about culture and heritage featured Latino characters, there weren’t as many biographies about Latino figures.*

*Disparity within racial and ethnic groups also isn’t always explored. For example, Armstrong said, most Asian Americans in children’s books are East Asian, without much representation of South or Southeast Asians. That portrayal can frame readers’ perception of who counts as “Asian American,” and who doesn’t, Armstrong said.*

*“We still need to do a lot of work in terms of having more diverse representation, and in seeing how different communities are represented in the American story,” she said.*
By Fonati Abrokwa

As a leader in your school community, what can you do that will really make a difference? Maybe this is a question you consider every day. Or, with so much always going on, it could be something you haven’t consciously thought about in a while. Either way, here’s a suggestion that I believe will create positive change at your school, just like it’s doing at mine: Encourage and embrace a journey in diversity, equity, and inclusion programming.

The key here is “journey” and not just an isolated plan or initiative. People usually look forward to journeys, while they tend to be apprehensive about new policies. Additionally, progress in DEI shouldn’t have a destination or a finish line, but it should continue as a means for real and lasting improvement. Make DEI work a perpetual journey intended to bring together students, parents, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni. It’s not a competitive race that creates winners and losers.

At this moment in history, your reaction to the idea of DEI programming might be skepticism or angst. There’s no denying that schools have become the settings for intense debates about a variety of controversial issues. Why wade into choppy waters, especially right now?

Well, these debates underscore exactly why DEI efforts are so important. As leaders, we must cultivate environments that allow for challenging and sometimes uncomfortable conversations. We need a larger tent to make certain that these forums are safe spaces, with a group norm of respect, where students can speak freely. These need to be no-judgment zones, and sometimes it is helpful for adults to cede the floor entirely to students. The focus should be on empathic listening and guided discussion. Another thought: Hold forums where students can ask questions of staff and administrators. These can be “ask us anything” sessions, or they can be focused on a specific topic, like curriculum review or highlighting the contributions of marginalized groups.

1. Appoint a DEI point person but invite others to help

To keep your efforts on course, it’s good to hire or appoint someone to spearhead your school’s DEI framework and measure goals. At the start, not all people in your school will be rowing in the same direction on DEI work, so you need a captain of the boat to set the pace and path. Beyond a point person, though, it’s critical to get buy-in from all school groups. Naming DEI ambassadors is a great way to promote awareness, while simultaneously spotlighting individuals who are invested in the programming. These ambassadors can be part of a DEI committee that helps design a calendar of diversity-related activities throughout the year.

2. Hold student forums

Giving students a voice in DEI work is an incredibly important part of the puzzle. Students deserve a say in their school’s climate. First, allow students opportunities to gather to discuss DEI topics and events. This could be done in tandem with student-government leaders. Second, make certain that these forums are safe spaces, with a group norm of respect, where students can speak freely. These need to be no-judgment zones, and sometimes it is helpful for adults to cede the floor entirely to students. The focus should be on empathic listening and guided discussion. Another thought: Hold forums where students can ask questions of staff and administrators. These can be “ask us anything” sessions, or they can be focused on a specific topic, like curriculum review or highlighting the contributions of marginalized groups.

3. Infuse training with opportunity for self-reflection

Host DEI self-reflection sessions to reach your learning objectives. In this structure, you present information—maybe the difference between equality and equity or cultural labels that are insensitive—and encourage participants to evaluate their own views. Similar to student forums, these periods should be nonjudgmental and not accusatory. They challenge people to grow within themselves.

4. Don’t treat bias like a dirty word

Regardless of race, gender, age, or background, we all have biases. “He’s gay so he won’t be good at football,” someone might say. When we normalize discussions about biases and habits of our minds, we decrease defensiveness and, instead, generate awareness. Shaming, on the other hand, can cause people to cover up their true thoughts or behavior. Once people begin recognizing their biases, they can start eliminating harmful thinking. And the goal should be continuous improvement—not immediate perfection.

5. Figure out how to track progress

Schools need to determine what areas to measure and track for success. Questions about feelings of inclusion and belonging should be part of engagement surveys. Establish benchmarks and then compare results over time. Progress might be slow at first, but after a while, there will be breakthroughs.

Within every organization, there will be skeptics who openly oppose DEI efforts or resist programming. Despite them, keep going. Ask for, provide, and accept feedback. The best idea you get might be from your harshest critic. As the DEI point person in my school, I’ve also learned it’s helpful to build and frequently tap into a network of DEI leaders in education. Lean on them for advice—I’ve found my colleagues more than willing to share insights and be a sounding board.

Our children are watching. They want to learn. What are we teaching them about cultivating and appreciating diversity, striving for equity, and creating social spaces where everyone feels included? What can children teach us about these same subjects? Your DEI journey will surely have rough roads and detours, but every step your school takes will be invaluable to our children and their futures. Take that first step now.

Fonati Abrokwa is the special assistant to the president for diversity and inclusion at Milton Hershey School in Hershey, Pa.
OPINION

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Why Educators Need to Make Literacy Accessible, Individualized, and Inclusive

By Starr Sackstein

Literacy may be the ultimate gatekeeper for students, and all too often, it is an issue that is directly impacted by equity and access.

Although schools fully realize the magnitude of reading failure, which impacts two-thirds of our nation’s secondary students, far too many are not receiving the literacy training they need to become proficient readers.

Importantly, the need for reading recovery should not be regarded as a life sentence that determines future educational and career pathways.

Educators ought to focus on accessing tools and strategies to help struggling readers make more than a year’s progress in a year’s time so they are able to catch up to grade level; succeed in common, real-world situations such as driver’s tests and job applications; and make intentional choices about college and career. At the same time, educators ought to fully acknowledge and make room for the social-emotional components of literacy, which may determine whether students become confident and capable lifelong readers.

Reading Recovery in a Growing District

I have spent the last 25 years working in the Leander Independent School District in Texas during which time we have experienced explosive growth—we have expanded from five elementary schools to 27 while adding eight middle schools and five more high schools. As a result, Leander ISD has become one of the fastest-growing districts in the state of Texas.

Unfortunately, as the student population grew, so did the number of students in need of reading-recovery work. My colleagues and I noticed that some students decoded well but did not understand what they read, while others were able to decode well and even had strong automaticity, but very little comprehension. Learning to decode at the word level, read fluently, and tackle texts of increasing complexity are essential stages of growth for readers, and our teachers need to be able to accurately diagnose and support readers through each of these stages in a consistent, equitable, and ongoing fashion.

Diagnostic and Fluency Tools

The state-issued STAAR program and the Reading Inventory provide us with a broad-based overview of literacy levels, but to acquire more than a snapshot of reading ability, we felt it necessary to take a more in-depth approach. In the spring of 2013, we adopted Access Code, a blended-learning program developed by Foundations in Learning, which includes the iASK screener and diagnostic.

This program empowered us to gather more precise information on students’ specific strengths and weaknesses and implement instruction tailored to their individual needs. Using the Lexile system, a semantic and syntactic measurement that matches students to books they can read independently, students who were using Access Code were able to increase their Lexile scores by 400 points, or four times the yearly anticipated average.

By combining these balanced literacy tools with small-group instruction, individual guided reading, and vocabulary acquisition, we began experiencing exceptional gains in reading recovery and overall literacy. At present, Leander ISD has issued over 500 Access Code licenses across the district for use by a broad range of students in an effort to ensure there are no barriers to access for those who need targeted assistance and instruction.

Equity and Empathy

While addressing reading-recovery fundamentals is vital, teaching readers the interpretive and social-emotional aspects of reading is also critically important. Many thought leaders and educators are beginning to highlight the importance of social-emotional learning inside the literacy space. Kylene Beers and Bob Probst, in particular, have outlined the equity and empathy aspects of reading in their co-authored book, Disrupting Thinking: Why How We Read Matters.

We have strived to implement some of their key ideas at Leander ISD including the notion that students need to become responsible, responsive, and compassionate readers; responsible in that they are able to accurately interpret text and think about what it means for others and society at large, responsive in that they ought to fully engage with and react to what they are reading, and compassionate in that they ought to learn to appreciate a va-
riety of perspectives and develop empathy through reading.

To support these goals, our Curriculum and Instruction Team provides on-campus professional learning via classroom modeling, planning, and co-teaching to ensure implementation of both the foundational and social-emotional components of reading acquisition. In addition, our Secondary Literacy Academy and Workshop Support Group hold monthly professional learning sessions to grow our collective knowledge and develop an even deeper understanding of our literacy objectives.

A Moral Imperative

Providing equity when it comes to literacy instruction has become a moral imperative as well as a civil rights issue. At Leander ISD, we are focused on delivering appropriate reading instruction that is accessible, individualized, and inclusive. There are groups of marginalized students who have never seen characters in literature that resemble themselves.

Teachers need to recognize this dynamic and challenge themselves to balance curricular offerings to include texts that will resonate with different readers. Moreover, by erasing our preconceived notions of struggling readers and their future pathways, we can concentrate on addressing their foundational literacy needs and help them grow into flexible, empathetic thinkers and readers with the skills and confidence to open up any number of doors.

Starr Sackstein is a secondary educator and school leader in New York. She is the author of several books on education, on topics such as going gradeless, peer feedback, and blogging.
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